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SECOND SERIES.

THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WEHR WOLF," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "JOSEPH WILMOT," "MARY PRICE," "ELLEN PERCY," "AGNES, OR BEAUTY AND PLEASURE," "KENNETH," "THE RYE HOUSE PLOT," "THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE," &c.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

NEW EDITION.

VOL. III.

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SECOND SERIES OF

THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.

TWO INTRODUCTORY CHAPTERS.

FIRST INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

In the neighbourhood of the ancient city of Canterbury, there stood some years ago a beautiful little cottage in the midst of a garden surrounded by a high hedge. Through this verdant barrier glimpses might be caught of the parterres of flowers arranged with a neatness and cultivated with a care that denoted the supervision of feminine taste; and no stranger passing

that way during the season when Flora is wont to deck the earth with the loveliest and richest hues, could fail to pause, at least for a few moments, and contemplate that picturesque spot.

But oft-times the interest of the scene was enhanced by the presence of two charming female forms, moving along the gravel walks, and affording in the simplicity of their attire a striking contrast to the pomp and gaud of the tulips, the daffodils, the pinks, the roses, and the peonies, which margined their path.

The two beautiful creatures just alluded to were sisters—and they were likewise orphans. Their parents they had never known: but in that cottage they had been reared from their infancy by an affectionate aunt who fostered them with a maternal care. From this relative they had learnt that they were born in London: but their earliest reminiscences were associated only with their present picturesque though humble abode. Their father, they were informed, was an officer in the army who had been killed in the Flemish campaigns in 1795; and this incident, it appeared, had produced such a shock upon the mind of their mother, who was still in her confinement with the younger girl when the sad intelligence reached her, that she died of a broken heart. Thus was it that the care of the orphans had devolved upon their deceased father's sister, Miss Stanley—a maiden lady, with but a limited income. The cottage near Canterbury, where she dwelt, was however her own property; and as she was a woman of frugal habits, she had managed to ensure the advantages of a good education for her two nieces.

In the ages of the sisters there was a difference of about twenty months: but in their personal appearance there was a great discrepancy. Clara, the elder, was a splendid creature—remarkably precocious in the expanding richness of her form, and looking two or three years older than she really was: whereas Louisa, the younger, was of that nymph-like beauty and sylphid grace which invested her with an air of childish sweetness and charming simplicity. A similar contrast existed with regard to their minds, their tastes, and their pursuits, although they had been subjected to the same influences in respect to training and education: but it was nevertheless a fact that while Clara was fond of romances and love-tales, Louisa's favourite reading was the highest standard of poetry, and books calculated to improve and strengthen the understanding. Moreover, the elder sister was somewhat indolent in her habits, and disliked needle-work: whereas Louisa could not bear to be unoccupied, and was always busied with her books, her flowers, her music, or her needle. There was also a tinge of selfishness and egoism in Clara's disposition, which had peeped forth in her childhood and become decidedly perceptible in her girlhood, although the mode of life in which she was reared was too regular, simple, and unartificial to develop that sentiment completely. But, on the other hand, Louisa was all artless generosity and ingenuous good-nature—the purity of her thoughts reflecting in the amiability of her manners, and the innocence of her soul shining in her looks and penetrating all her actions.

In unruffled tranquillity had passed the existence of these lovely beings until Clara had attained the age of nineteen and Louisa was consequently a few months past that of seventeen. Then did a terrible calamity befall the orphans—a blow which struck all the more severely inasmuch as it came with such cruel abruptness. This was not the death—but perhaps the worse than death—of their aunt, who was suddenly stricken with a paralysis that deprived her of the faculty of speech and prostrated the powers of her reason. The ablest professional assistance that Canterbury could afford, was called in: but no mitigation of the misfortune resulted from the talent, skill, and attention bestowed upon the case;—and, though the aunt's life was pronounced beyond any immediate danger, she nevertheless lived as it were without the sense of existence—dumb as the inferior beings of the creation, and with the mind's lamp extinguished apparently for ever.

Some months elapsed—and so long as the money lasted which the sisters found in their unfortunate relative's writing-desk, they did not give themselves much thought as to pecuniary matters. Clara's indolence threw upon Louisa the principal charge of the household arrangements; and the younger sister's economy—a habit derived from her aunt's example—made the immediate resources endure as long as possible. But one morning, when Louisa gave the female-servant the last guinea to change, the young maiden was for the first time troubled as to the source of future supplies. She communicated the cause of her perplexity to Clara, who suggested the prudence of examining the aunt's private papers in order to ascertain whence her income was derived. This step was accordingly adopted: but nothing was found in the writing-desk at all calculated to assist the orphans out of their dilemma. Louisa however recollected that her aunt was in the habit of paying an occasional visit to a bank in Canterbury; and putting on her bonnet and scarf, she at once repaired to that establishment to make the inquiries which circumstances suggested. The banker received the young maiden with kindness, and informed her that Miss Stanley, the aunt, had been in the habit of drawing every half-year for sixty pounds upon a certain Mr. Beckford who resided in London, and who had invariably honoured the draughts: but who Mr. Beckford was, or what claim the aunt had upon him, the banker was totally unable to state. He however undertook to write to that gentleman and describe the calamity which had reduced Miss Stanley to a condition of worse than childish helplessness.

In a few days Louisa called at the bank again;

and to her joy she learnt that a letter had been received from London, containing favourable intelligence. In that response Mr. Beckford briefly expressed his sorrow at the aunt's misfortune, and undertook to honour thenceforth the joint draught of the two nieces for the same half-yearly sum as before.

Eighteen months now passed away without any incident worthy of record: but at the end of this period the usual draught drawn by the sisters upon Mr. Beckford was returned unpaid from the London banker through the Canterbury one. The words, "No instructions to cash this cheque," seemed to indicate some oversight on Mr. Beckford's part; and Louisa accordingly wrote to him. But her letter remained without an answer; and a second, third, and fourth epistle experienced the same unaccountable and alarming silence. The Canterbury banker considerately offered to get his London agent to call upon Mr. Beckford: but the London banker never took any notice of the application. In fine, several weeks passed without enabling the orphans to elicit any satisfactory intelligence concerning the matter; and were it not for Louisa's economies and savings, they would have been plunged into the most serious embarrassments. As it was, however, they saw the immediate necessity of adopting some measure to ascertain the cause of Mr. Beckford's silence; and, after a long deliberation, the young ladies could arrive at no other conclusion than that one of them must proceed to London.

The moment this step was determined upon, Clara sprang from the arm-chair in which she had been indolently half-reclining, and volunteered to undertake the journey; alleging that as she was the elder it was her duty to encounter any perils attendant thereon. She likewise observed that as Louisa was so well acquainted with the household duties and was moreover accustomed to minister to their poor afflicted aunt, it was in every respect advisable for her to remain at home. The younger sister offered no objection to this reasoning; and an inside place having been secured in the stage-coach for the following day, Clara made her little preparations for departure.

The young lady was not indolent now. A remarkable spirit of activity seemed suddenly to have inspired that form which looked so softly voluptuous and so sensuously lazy as it lolled in the arm-chair. To tell the truth, Clara experienced a secret and unknown joy at the thought of visiting London—that city of which she had heard her aunt speak at times, and of which she had read such exciting accounts in novels and love-tales. She was however ashamed of herself for giving way to this sensation of pleasure, undefined though it were;—and when she beheld her afflicted aunt, and then turned her eyes towards her fair young sister—when she saw that unfortunate relative gazing on vacancy with dull and meaningless look, and when she observed the crystal tears trickling down the damask surface of Louisa's cheeks,—Clara was stricken with remorse to think that she should even for a single moment have rejoiced at the prospect of leaving the home which contained all she had near or dear to her upon earth.

It was in the month of July, 1814, that Clara Stanley was thus called upon by circumstances to undertake a journey to London. She was now twenty-one years of age, and assuredly was as magnificent a creature as the sun ever shone upon. Louisa was a little more than nineteen; and her enchanting beauty was combined with so gentle and winning a grace that the most brutal ruffian in the universe could not have injured a hair of that lovely being's head. The appearance of the elder sister was calculated to ravish and enthral the senses—that of the younger to captivate the mind. Clara had a look that was amorous and languishing: but artless innocence sate enthroned on Louisa's brow and beamed in every glance that flashed from her eyes. The former was endowed with woman's softest and most seducing charms: the latter was the impersonation of candour and purity.

Such were the two beings who stood, on a July morning, at the door of the cottage to breathe a few last fond words in each other's ears and exchange the farewell kiss. The weather was superb: the earth was already flooded with the burnished glory that poured from the eastern horizon;—and the flowers were expanding to the god of day—some in the splendour of their pomp—others in the delicacy of their beauty. In the shade formed by the evergreens and larger plants, the dew-drops still hung impearled to the pink, the lily, and the rose—like tears upon beauty's cheek, where the tints expressing each transient emotion are so exquisite in their blendings. But where the sun-beams shone full upon emerald leaf and variegated flower, the morning's freshness had exhaled away; and the golden air was becoming heavy and faint with perfume.

Beneath the mingling honey-suckles and roses which covered the cottage portico and formed a natural canopy that far outvied the velvet gaud which spreads above the thrones of kings,—the sisters stood to say their last farewells. Louisa's grief was enhanced by a presentiment of evil for which she could not account, and which she could not shake off. It appeared to her as if she were embracing her sister for the last time,—as if they were separating, not for days only, but for months and years—perhaps for ever! Clara was astonished and distressed at the wildness of Louisa's sorrow, which partook of the nature of a rending anguish and deep despair: but when the young maiden, amidst passionate sobs and deluging tears, revealed the presentiment which thus tortured her, the elder sister shuddered as if she had just received the explanation of a misgiving which had likewise sprung up in her own mind.

But at length they parted: yes—they parted—Clara being compelled to tear herself away from Louisa's embrace;—and while the former hurried on to overtake the maid-servant who had proceeded in advance with her box, the younger sister sped to her own chamber where she fell upon her knees and besought heaven to shield the loved one who had just gone forth as it were upon the wide world for the first time!

The coach office in Canterbury was reached—the box containing Clara's necessaries was placed on the roof of the vehicle—and the young lady, having taken her place inside, bade the maid-servant good-bye. Away rolled the coach: the outskirts of Canterbury were soon gained—and Clara kept her tearful eyes fixed upon the colossal tower of the cathedral until it faded from her view. Then, as the last familiar object which marked her dwelling-place was thus lost in the distance, she felt as if an immeasurable gulf had suddenly yawned between herself and the home which she had just left—and her tears flowed freely. But her fellow-travellers, who happened to be kind-hearted and worthy people, proffered their consolations;—and one of them began to expatiate so enthusiastically upon the wonders, the bustle, and the gaiety of London, that Clara forgot her grief in the interest with which she listened to his remarks.

It was not until late in the evening that the coach entered London: and although the dim oil-lamps afforded but an imperfect view of the streets through which the vehicle passed in its progress towards Gracechurch Street, yet Clara was delighted, astonished, and bewildered by the endless maze of buildings which it thus threaded. At length, having crossed old London Bridge, the coach stopped at the Crow Keys inn, where the young lady, by the advice of her communicative fellow-traveller, resolved to pass the night.

Early in the morning she rose—dressed herself, with the utmost care, in her best apparel—and, having partaken of breakfast, procured a hackney-coach to convey her to the West End. The driver was instructed to proceed to Mr. Beckford's, No. 20, Hanover Square; and while threading all the various streets through which it was necessary to pass, Clara had an opportunity of judging how far the descriptions she had heard and read of London were based upon truth. In some respects she was disappointed—but in others she was more than satisfied;—and altogether she could not conceal from herself the fact that she was well pleased at having had an excuse to visit the metropolis. Now and then, as she was rolling along in the hackney-coach, her heart swelled and her bosom heaved as she thought of her afflicted aunt and her loving sister: but the next moment some brilliant equipage dashing by, or a handsome edifice, or a superb shop would attract her gaze—and thus was her mind diverted from unpleasant reflections.

The hackney-coach entered Hanover Square and stopped at the number which Clara had mentioned. The driver knocked at the door—and a powdered lacquey came forth. But to the young lady's mingled astonishment and dismay, the servant declared that no such person as Mr. Beckford was known at the house, which indeed was the mansion of Sir Archibald Malvern, a baronet. Clara was bewildered and knew not what to think. She was certain, beyond all possibility of mistake, that the draughts which herself and Louisa had jointly drawn for the last eighteen months, were addressed to Mr. Beckford, No. 20, Hanover Square; and yet he was unknown at the place! The lacquey, observing that she was perplexed, added to her confusion by volunteering the assurance that he knew the name of every family in the Square, and that there was no house in the occupancy of a Mr. Beckford. Clara inquired whether any letters addressed to Mr. Beckford had ever been received at No. 20: but to this query the man unhesitatingly returned a negative.

The young lady was utterly at a loss what course to pursue or what conjecture to form. But feeling the absolute necessity of sifting the matter to the very bottom, she begged the servant to obtain for her a few minutes' interview with Sir Archibald Malvern. To this request the man replied that his master was not at home—that he had been absent for some weeks—and that it appeared quite uncertain when he would return: then, after a pause, he added that Sir Archibald's son, Mr. Valentine Malvern, was within and would no doubt see the young lady. Clara at once accepted this proposition; and the lacquey introduced her into the house.

Scarcely had she waited a couple of minutes in the splendidly-furnished room to which she was shown, when a tall, slender, handsome young gentleman, about two-and-twenty years of age, made his appearance. A profound melancholy shaded his countenance; and when he spoke his voice, naturally full of masculine melody, was marked by the accents of a deep sorrow. Altogether, his appearance and his manners were calculated to inspire a sincere feeling of interest and excite emotions of true sympathy in his behalf.

This young gentleman was Valentine Malvern; and he had already heard from the domestic the nature of the inquiries which Clara had been making. But he was unable to relieve her of a single tittle of the grievous embarrassment in which she found herself placed: for the name of Beckford was entirely unknown to him. Although extremely polite, and indeed kindly courteous, towards Clara, Valentine was nevertheless so much absorbed in his own sorrows, whatever they were, that he did not seek to protract his interview with her;—and she had too much good taste to remain any longer than was necessary. She accordingly took her leave: but Valentine insisted upon handing her into the vehicle—and it struck her that he regarded

ıer with a feeling of compassion and interest as she bowed to him from the window of the coach in acknowledgment of his polite attention.

What plan was she now to adopt? One course alone remained: and that was to call upon the bankers through whom Mr. Beckford had been wont to remit the half-yearly stipend to the Canterbury agent. Thither she accordingly directed the coachman to proceed; and in a quarter of an hour the vehicle stopped again. She alighted—entered the vast banking establishment of an eminent firm at the West End—and made the requisite inquiry. The only answer she could obtain was to the effect that it was perfectly true the money had been for some years remitted through that bank—but that Mr. Beckford himself was altogether unknown there—that he had no account at the establishment—and that the cash to meet the half-yearly draughts, had on each occasion been brought by a ticket-porter or some other stranger of whom the clerks took no particular notice.

We need hardly observe that Clara Stanley quitted the bank in despair. Her last hope was gone—and it seemed too painfully certain that everything which regarded Mr. Beckford was involved in the darkest, deepest, most unaccountable mystery. There was no alternative but to hasten back to Canterbury and bear the sad intelligence to poor Louisa,—the intelligence that her mission had failed, and that the only hope which stood between them and beggary was annihilated!

Such was the harrowing reflection that occupied poor Clara Stanley as she rode back in the hackney-coach to the Cross Keys in Gracechurch Street. On reaching the tavern she dismissed the vehicle and made inquiries relative to the hours at which the stages started for Canterbury. She was directed to the booking-office close at hand: but short though the distance was, she was annoyed by an ill-looking, shabbily-dressed fellow, who pushed rudely two or three times against her. She was therefore glad when she crossed the threshold of the coach-office; and having engaged a place inside the first stage that was to start on the morrow, she felt for her purse to pay the deposit. But behold! her money was gone—and it instantaneously flashed to her mind that she had been robbed by the ruffian whose rudeness had so much annoyed her.

Driven almost to madness by this new calamity, the poor young lady rushed from the coach-office in pursuit of the villain; and, in her inexperience of London, she fancied that she might overtake him. But she had not sped many yards along the crowded street, when her natural good sense, breaking in upon the confusion of her ideas, convinced her of the utter hopelessness of her endeavour to catch the pickpocket in such a labyrinth as London;—and in a mood of the deepest despondency, she paused to reflect what course she should pursue.

At this juncture she was accosted by an elderly female whose good apparel, matronly demeanour, and urbane address constituted a sufficient guarantee for her respectability in the estimation of the inexperienced Clara Stanley;—and in answer to the questions which were put to her, in a voice of compassionate interest, the young lady unhesitatingly revealed all the causes of her perplexity.

But what followed from this confiding frankness on her part?—was that elderly female a friend whom heaven had raised up to protect the maiden, or a wretch whom hell had prompted to lead her to destruction?

The solution of the mystery will develop itself hereafter.

SECOND INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

LET the reader bear in mind that the visit of Clara Stanley to London occurred in the middle of July, 1814. The scene which we are about to record, took place a few weeks earlier:—namely, at the beginning of June in the same year.

It was eleven o'clock at night; and a lady sate alone in her bed-chamber, at a beautiful villa situated a short distance from London, in the neighbourhood of Blackheath.

This lady was four or five and twenty years of age, and of remarkable beauty. Her toilette was arranged for the night: her hair was confined beneath an elegant lace cap—her superb form was enveloped in a loose wrapper the snowy whiteness of which was not more stainless than the swelling bosom which it half revealed—and her naked feet were thrust into red morocco slippers. But though thus prepared to retire to rest—though her maid was dismissed for the night—and though the chamber-door was carefully locked,—yet did the lady remain seated in an arm-chair, with the lamp burning on the table in the middle of the apartment.

This chamber was spacious and elegantly furnished. It was upon the first floor, and had one large bow-window looking upon the beautiful grounds in the midst of which the villa, which stood detached from any other house, was situated. Opening from the bed-chamber was a bath-room, which likewise served as a dressing-closet for the master of the mansion—a circumstance that was denoted by the shaving apparatus and other articles of the male toilette which were scattered about. The bath itself was not sunk in the floor, but was raised upon it; and there was a large heavy lid to cover it when not in use.

Having glanced at these particulars, we must return to the lady, who still remained seated in the bed-chamber, but with an air of listening attention. Presently there was a noise as of some light gravel thrown up at the window; and the countenance of the fair one became all in a moment animated with joy. A rich crimson

flush spread, like a stream of lava, over her face —her neck—her very bosom;—and the voluptuous flood of light poured into her magnificent eyes. Starting from her seat, she extinguished the lamp—opened the casement—and then took from a drawer a ladder made of silken cord. Having fastened one end to a strong iron bar which was used to secure the shutters when closed, she gently lowered the ladder out of the window. All this was the work of a few moments; and the proceeding was accomplished with as much noiseless precaution as celerity.

The lady had placed the iron bar in such a manner that the ends rested against the upright joints of the window-frame; and as the silken cord was strongly knitted, the means of ascent to the chamber were thus rendered perfectly safe. The moon was shining—the night was clear, calm, and beautiful: but the villa stood so far from the main road that no one passing along it could have observed what was taking place at the open window, now that the lamp was extinguished inside the room.

In a few moments after the silken ladder was lowered from the casement, a gentleman ascended and made his entry into the apartment. The ladder was instantaneously drawn up—the window was closed—and the lady and her lover were locked in a fond embrace.

We have already said that she was ravishingly beautiful: we must now observe that the gentleman was remarkably handsome and of a fine commanding figure. He was perhaps as much as forty-three or forty-four years of age—but his appearance was that of a man considerably younger: for his hair was black as jet, without a single streak of silver—his teeth were superb—and his noble brow was as smooth and free from wrinkles as that of the Belvidere Apollo. And his was one of those full rich voices which, when breathing the accents of love and the vows of passion, no woman can hear without an emotion—scarcely with impunity. His manners, too, were fascinating to a degree—his conversation was invested with all the charms that a brilliant intellect could supply—and his experience of human nature rendered him an adept in the practice of all those little artifices which are too well calculated to secure and rivet the affections of a tender, weak, and confiding woman.

It was not extraordinary, then, if this gentleman, so handsome in person and so polished in manners, should have won the love of a being so many years younger than himself. And that she *did* love him—fervidly, fondly, adoringly—was evidenced by the impassioned warmth of the embrace and the glowing ardour of the caresses wherewith she welcomed him.

"At length we meet again, my well beloved," he said, in the most melting accents of that voice which seemed to sink deep into her soul every time she heard it. "It is an age since last I pressed thee in my arms and experienced paradise in the rapturous enjoyment of thy kisses!"

"Yes—two long months since last we met in *secret*," returned the lady: "and no two years of my life ever seemed longer! But *he*," she added, evidently alluding to her husband, to breathe even whose name would have appeared to her a desecration of this love which, criminal though it were, was so ineffably sweet in comparison with any feeling she would possibly entertain towards that husband,—"but *he* has been so much at home lately that I began to fear he had grown uxorious and intended to tie himself to my apron-strings."

"But at length he has afforded us an opportunity of meeting again!" said the lover, as he contemplated with unfeigned rapture that splendid countenance upon which the slanting moon-beams fell through the casement. "Oh! you cannot imagine the joy which filled my heart this morning when I received your dear note telling me that your husband was to be absent for two days! Would to heaven that he might never return! But all day long I have been tormented with the fear that he might change his intention—that he might remain at home——and it was not until the moment that I reached the boundary-wall of the garden ere now and saw the signal-lamp burning in your chamber—*this* chamber, dearest, where I am at length able to fold you once more in my arms——"

But at the instant that the lips of the lady and her lover met in another burning, impassioned kiss, a furious knocking at the door and ringing of the house-bell startled them terribly and filled their souls with consternation.

"My husband!" cried the lady in despair. "O God! if he should suspect—if his absence were a mere pretext——he will kill me—he will kill me!"

"Courage, dearest—courage!" said her paramour, summoning all his presence of mind to his aid. "It is impossible that he can have discovered anything——our precautions have been too well taken."

"But you must fly, my beloved—you must fly!" exclaimed the lady. "Ah! the household is already disturbed——the footman is descending to open the front door——My God! in a few moments it will be too late——"

"Conceal me somewhere, dearest—anywhere—and let us trust to chance!" said the lover, as he sustained his terrified mistress in his arms and endeavoured to reassure her with the fondest caresses.

"Conceal you!—where?" she murmured in utter bewilderment: then, as a thought flashed to her mind, she said in a rapid whisper, "Ah! I recollect——come—the bath-room!"

"Yes—in the bath itself," observed the lover, catching joyfully at the idea: "and when *he* is fast asleep, you can give me my release."

The arrangement was instantly carried into effect. The guilty pair exchanged one fond

rapid kiss—the lover then concealed himself in the bath—and the lady closed the lid upon him.

Scarcely was this done, when rapid steps were heard ascending the stairs; and the lady, having lighted the lamp, unlocked the door of her chamber. This was a fearful moment of suspense and terror for her—and she trembled to meet the looks of her husband who was approaching. But a few words which he immediately uttered in a kind tone, suddenly relieved her of those excruciating alarms; and she hastily inquired what had happened to bring him home sooner than he had intended.

"Do not be frightened, my love," said the husband, following his beauteous wife into the bed-chamber and closing the door: "but we must leave home instantly! I have ordered the carriage to be got ready—and to-morrow morning we shall breakfast at Dover. Thence we must proceed without delay to France, where we shall have to remain until this accursed business has blown over."

"What do you mean? and what misfortune has happened?" exclaimed the lady, now fixing her eyes in mingled astonishment and alarm upon her husband, who was a man of about fifty years of age,—old enough to be her father,—and of somewhat dissipated appearance.

"I have killed young Sefton in a duel," he observed, in answer to the agitated queries which his wife put to him,—"a duel fought across the dinner-table at Lord Herbert's——"

"A duel!" echoed the lady, her blood curdling with horror: and her looks involuntarily settled on her husband's hands to see if they were stained with evidences of the tragedy.

"Yes—a duel with pistols—and I shot him through the heart," he cried, with a sort of ferocious exultation in his tone and manner: and now his wife observed that his countenance was flushed with drinking as well as with excitement. "But let us hasten our preparations—— you must lose no time to dress yourself, my love—— I am really sorry in the extreme thus to disturb you——"

"Then you really intend me to accompany you?" said the lady, with a half-imploring, half-deprecating look. "Could I not follow you to-morrow—or next day—and in the meantime settle any little affairs which this hurried departure would leave in sad confusion?"

"No, my dear—you will accompany me," replied her husband: and as he gave this answer with a laconic sternness, he flung upon his wife a look which convinced her that any farther remonstrance would be useless.

The lady accordingly summoned her maid—for the entire household was now up and stirring: and in a few minutes both the bed-chamber and the bath-room were thrown into the confusion invariably attendant on hurried preparations for travelling. Trunks, band-boxes, and portmanteaus were brought in—clothes were scattered about—cupboards and drawers emptied of their contents. The lady purposely caused her own trunk to be placed upon the bath while it was being packed, so that there might be no chance of the lid's removal by any accident until after the departure—and *then*, the frail one hoped, her lover would have an opportunity of liberating himself.

As a matter of course the lady hurried her preparations as much as possible; and her husband was too anxious to start, to create any delay on his side. The carriage drove round to the front door—the boxes were speedily strapped upon the roof—the valet and the maid who were to accompany their master and mistress, were in readiness—and all the arrangements were apparently completed. But the lady now lingered in her chamber at the last moment—and her husband was waiting impatiently upon the threshold to escort her down stairs. What did she seek in the cupboards and drawers that she was ransacking?—what was she searching after amidst the clothes that were tossing about on the floor? The silken ladder, which she had hitherto forgotten in the hurry and confusion of the incidents of the last hour!

She dared not leave it behind to be found by the servants who were to remain in charge of the house: for would it not tell a tale—or at least give rise to suspicions—most fatally injurious to herself? But where was it? She felt certain that it had not been packed up by accident amongst her own apparel; and it must consequently be somewhere about the room. Burning with the fever of suspense and tortured by alarms, the lady searched in all directions—while her husband, who remained upon the threshold, was becoming more and more impatient.

"What are you looking for?" he demanded.

"A ring which I have dropped—one that you gave me," was the excuse that rose readily to her lips.

"Never mind it, my love," he exclaimed, considerably softened. "I will purchase you a handsomer one in France."

"But I am resolved to find this," said the lady. "You can go down—I will follow you in a moment."

"No:—unless I stay here to hurry you on, you will be another hour. I know what ladies are in that respect."

At this moment his wife discovered the *real* object of her search—the silken ladder—lying amidst some of the articles which had been tossed forth from the drawers. An ejaculation of joy fell from her lips—and her husband asked if she had found the ring.

"Yes—I see it glittering in the dressing-closet," she replied: and springing into that place, she lifted the lid of the bath and threw in the silken ladder.

This was done as rapidly and as noiselessly as possible. She had no time to look into the

bath, nor even allow her hand to linger there for a moment that her lover might press it to his lips: and she dared not murmur a syllable —no, not even in the faintest whisper. The lid was raised and closed again, quick as the eye winks,—and a fearful load was removed from the lady's mind now that the silken ladder was in the keeping of her paramour, who, she felt assured, would understand wherefore it was thus consigned to his care.

Having no farther excuse nor wish for delay, she took her husband's arm and accompanied him down to the carriage, which immediately whirled them away at a rapid pace.

But how terminated the adventure of the bath-room?—who was the distinguished individual beloved by that lady of transcendent beauty?—and was her frailty to remain concealed from her husband and pass unpunished?

These questions will be answered in the course of the following narrative.

CHAPTER I

THE PARTY OF SIX.

It was in the middle of September, 1814, that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, now Regent of the kingdom, accepted an invitation to dine with one of his oldest and most faithful friends, the Marquis of Leveson.

But it was an express understanding that the party was to be altogether a private one—consisting of gentlemen only—and that the number present was to be limited to six, including the Prince himself. For his Royal Highness had his whims and caprices in this respect; and, glad to escape at times from ceremonial banquets and formal entertainments, he enjoyed nothing so much as a convivial little festival at which he could throw off all reserve and abandon himself to the full license of the occasion. In plain terms, the Prince was seldom more happy than when in the company of a few male friends, with whom he could indulge in the ribald jest, the obscene song, and the brimming glass, without constraint and without fear of being talked about next day.

The party of six accordingly met at the splendid mansion of the Marquis of Leveson in Albemarle Street. The noble host was a widower, and already on the bleak side of sixty. He was a man who had made pleasure the study of his life, and expended his enormous annual revenues upon the most unprofitable of pursuits. His house was fitted up with oriental luxury and palatial magnificence; and rumour had whispered that within those walls there was a suite of apartments containing pictures and statues of such a character as to excite maddening desires even in the breast of the sternest anchorite or the coldest virgin.

In personal appearance the Marquis was short, thin, but well made; and what with an admirable wig, a brilliant set of false teeth, dyed whiskers, the use of all the choicest cosmetics, and the artistic skill of a Parisian tailor, his lordship indemnified himself as much as possible against the ravages of time.

The Prince of Wales was now fifty-two years of age and upwards. He was corpulent in person—and his cheeks were bloated and puffy: but his well proportioned limbs, his commanding aspect, his lofty brow, and the florid complexion which imparted an air of healthfulness to his countenance, mitigated the effect of that general obesity. He wore a wig—and he also patronised cosmetics: but he was not a quarter so much indebted to art as was his friend Lord Leveson. For his Royal Highness's teeth were still in excellent preservation; and as he had shaved off his whiskers, there was no necessity to use hair-dye.

The four guests who had been invited by the Marquis to meet his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, shall be enumerated in due order.

The first was the Earl of Curzon—a tall, fine, handsome man, of about thirty; with a dark olive complexion, jet black curling hair, a Grecian profile, and superb teeth. He had been married three or four years to a lady of rank, beauty, and wealth: but his habits were far from domestic—and he was indeed inveterate in the pursuit of pleasure.

The second guest was Colonel Malpas — a gentleman of about the same age as the Earl of Curzon. He was tall, slender, and delicate-looking—with light hair, a brown moustache, and carefully curled whiskers. He spoke in a drawling tone—was languid in his movements and affected in his manners—and was, in fact, the veritable type of a "drawing-room soldier." Pecuniary matters, or some other causes concerning which there appeared to be a little mystery, had led to his marriage with the daughter of a retired butcher: and although his wife was an heiress, the match proved horribly disgusting and positively shocking to the aristocratic families with which Colonel Malpas claimed relationship.

The third guest was Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a young baronet of about six or seven and twenty, who on attaining his majority had come into the enjoyment of an entailed estate yielding immense revenues, which he lavished in all kinds of fashionable dissipation. He was good-looking, but had a somewhat sickly appearance: indeed, it was no fault on his part if a naturally good constitution were not speedily undermined by late hours, hard drinking, the excitement of the gaming table, and excessive sensuality in respect to women. He was unmarried, and seemed likely to remain so.

The fourth member of the delectable group was Mr. Horace Sackville. This young gentleman, who had no titular prefix to his name, was known as the nephew—though scandal whispered that he was in plain reality the son—of a certain Miss Bathurst, of whom we shall have to speak more hereafter. For the present suffice it to say that this lady was tolerably well off, moved in the first circles, and was believed to have been at one time on very intimate terms with the Prince of Wales. At all events, her nephew Horace was a special favourite with his Royal Highness, who frequently made him handsome presents and otherwise treated him with marked kindness. The young gentleman, who was about four-and-twenty and of very handsome appearance, had the good taste not to presume upon the species of confidence which he thus enjoyed with the Prince: indeed, he was rather reserved and bashful than otherwise; — but he could sing an excellent song when "drawn out"

VENETIA TRELAWNY.

and this circumstance, together with the known fact that he was a favourite with the Prince, was the cause of his being one of the "select few" on the present occasion.

The reader is now thoroughly introduced to the party of six to whom we alluded at the commencement of this chapter. The banquet to which they sate down, was composed of the choicest delicacies that could possibly tempt the appetite or that wealth could procure. But then Lord Leveson kept a French cook, at a salary of a thousand guineas a-year: and he had imported a native East Indian expressly for the purpose of dressing curries and making mulligitawney. His lordship, moreover, paid five hundred a-year to his "wine-taster"—an individual whose sole occupation was to select the produce of the finest vintages for his noble master's cellar. Then, at his lordship's country-seats there were pineries and vineries, and hot-houses of all descriptions—and in his lordship's parks were fat bucks—and his lordship's immense wealth moreover commanded the choicest produce of all the markets. It would therefore have been astonishing indeed if the banquet were not pre-eminently satisfactory, both as regarded the choice dainties and the exquisite wines.

Let us suppose the cloth removed—the dessert placed upon the table—the domestics retired—and the wine circulating freely: we may now listen to the conversation which is passing amongst the six personages seated at the board.

"I am indebted to you, Leveson," said the Prince Regent, as he sipped his wine, "for the most agreeable entertainment I have experienced for some months past. This is really a new pleasure; and upon my word, in these days of monotony and sameness, I can well understand the feeling which induced the Persian monarch to offer a reward for some original and unexplored enjoyment."

"Does your Royal Highness mean that London

has grown so uncommonly dull?" asked Colonel Malpas, in his most elaborated drawing-room drawl.

"Most assuredly I do!" exclaimed the Prince. "For my part, I see none but the same faces wherever I go—at Court, at entertainments, in the parks—'tis all the same, until the very aspect of society becomes so insipid——"

"In fact, sir," remarked Lord Leveson,—for the habit had recently sprung up in Court circles to address the Princes of the Blood as "sir," so as to avoid the frequent repetition of the more formal mode of "your Royal Highness,"—"in fact, sir, you look upon the female portion of the fashionable world as a galaxy of beauties whose charms lose their power by becoming familiar to the eye—and therefore you desire to welcome the advent of some new star?"

"By heaven! talk of new stars," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, in a tone of enthusiasm, "what planet can be more bewitching than the one that has so lately entered our sublunary sphere?"

"Ah! I know to whom you allude," ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I saw her riding in her carriage this very day——"

"Yes—she was pointed out to me in the park last Sunday afternoon," interrupted Colonel Malpas, speaking rather more quickly than was his wont. "She is a positive angel!"

"No—her beauty is not of a celestial character," remarked Sir Douglas. "It is the voluptuous loveliness which one's imagination pictures in an odalisque, reclining languidly on the cushion in some orient seraglio."

"By Jove! 'tis an admirable description of her rich, luxuriant, sensuous style of beauty!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "Never in all my life did I behold so delicious a creature!"

"Who, in the name of fortune, is this model of loveliness that has turned all your heads?" demanded the Prince Regent, his curiosity now deeply excited.

"What!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson: "is it possible that your Royal Highness has not heard of Venetia Trelawney?"

"As mysterious as she is beautiful," added the Earl of Curzon.

"And as virtuous as she is incomprehensible," remarked Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

'Aye—but who can vouch that she is virtuous," demanded Colonel Malpas,—"since no one appears to be able to get acquainted with her? In fact, every body I meet is talking of her—and not a soul knows her even to speak to."

"It is precisely because she gives not the slightest encouragement to any one, that I pronounce her to be virtuous," replied the dissipated baronet. "A certain Duke, who shall be nameless, sent her a blank cheque the other day, with an intimation that she might fill it up to any amount she chose, provided she would look kindly upon him: and she returned it in an envelopé, without deigning even to pen a syllable of comment."

"Venetia Trelawney?" said the Prince Regent, repeating the name two or three times in a musing tone: "Venetia Trelawney? Surely I have heard of her before? By the bye, Horace," he exclaimed, a sudden recollection striking him, "was it not you who mentioned her to me?"

"I believe I said something on the subject to your Royal Highness," answered Mr. Sackville, with a certain embarrassment of manner: but instantly recovering himself, he added, "In fact, I now remember that I have once or twice spoken to you, sir, relative to this paragon of beauty."

"Ah! then you also have seen her, Horace?" cried the Prince Regent. "But you should have taken more pains to make me aware that there was such a charming novelty in our great metropolis."

"When I alluded to Miss Trelawney, sir, you appeared indifferent," said young Sackville; "and I did not therefore venture to dwell upon a topic in which your Royal Highness took no interest."

"I suppose my impression at the time was that you were speaking of some beauty of the ordinary stamp—the commonplace average of female attractions," observed the Prince. "But if you had told me that this was a grand exception to the general rule—a perfect rarity of the species—I should have instantaneously become as interested in Venetia Trelawney as I am now."

"Ah! she is a woman for whose sake a man might sell his soul to Satan, if such a sacrifice would purchase but a single hour of her love," said the old Marquis of Leveson, his mouth watering at the bare thought of the pleasures which his imagination depicted.

"And you tell me that no one knows her?" exclaimed the Prince, in astonishment. "Here am I surrounded by the most inveterate pleasure-hunters in all London; and yet I am assured that not one of you has contrived by any stratagem to scrape acquaintance with Miss Trelawney?"

"Such, nevertheless, appears to be the fact," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I have inquired of all my friends if they could introduce me to Venetia—and the universal response is, *'My dear fellow, I am racking my brains day and night to procure an introduction for myself.'*"

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed the Prince. "Do you mean me to understand that she has not a single friend or acquaintance in all London—but that she suddenly dropped from the clouds in the midst of a sphere which by all accounts she is so eminently calculated to adorn?"

"I mean to say," answered the dissipated baronet, "that a few weeks ago this paragon of loveliness appeared for the first time in the park. She was riding in a carriage, accompanied by a duenna-like lady of a certain age. Of course every one was ravished at the beauty of the unknown fair one. *'Who is she?'* was the universal question. No one can tell. A few days afterwards the report circulated that her name had been ascertained, and that it was Venetia Trelawney. Only conceive that delightful, romantic name of Venetia! *'Where does she live?'* was the next question which I asked: but I found that every one else was asking precisely the same thing. Well, in a few days more this query was solved also. Venetia Trelawney dwells in a sweet place, called Acacia Cottage, at Knightsbridge. *'Who is that duenna-like female that invariably accompanies her?'* was the third question prompted by an excruciating curiosity—or rather, a tender interest. But this point was more difficult to solve. However, in due time it became pretty well understood that the elderly lady is no relation, but a mere companion or friend; and she is said to be most respectably connected."

"Never mind the duenna," exclaimed the Prince. "Tell us about Venetia Trelawney—the charming Venetia."

"I have nothing more to tell your Royal Highness," answered the baronet. "You now know as much of the attractive and talented Miss Trelawney as I do myself."

"Depend upon it, she is some adventuress," observed the Prince, "who seeks to obtain notoriety by surrounding herself with an air of mystery."

"Not so," exclaimed the baronet; "for I forgot to add that she is reputed to be well off. At all events, she lives in good style—though in a very secluded manner; and she pays her tradesmen with scrupulous regularity."

"Ah! I see you have been putting your inquiries in all possible quarters," said the Prince, laughing.

"I admit the impeachment, sir," returned the baronet. "But as for Venetia being an adventuress, it is altogether out of the question. The circumstance relative to the Duke's blank cheque proves that she is not mercenary, and that her charms at all events are not to be purchased by gold."

"Your reasoning is certainly most forcible," said his Royal Highness. "What is the age of the heroine?"

"She looks about four-and-twenty, I should say," answered Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"No such thing!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon. "One-and-twenty at the outside."

"Well, I should not mind wagering heavily that she is six-and-twenty," drawled out Colonel Malpas.

"In truth," observed the Marquis of Leveson, "she is one of those magnificent beings whose features bear the stamp of youthful loveliness, but whose forms are matured in the most luxuriant proportions: and therefore it is difficult to judge her precise age."

"But at all events," said the Prince Regent, "she is old enough to make us wonder that, with such transcendent loveliness, she should still be unmarried. What do you think, Horace?" he inquired, turning towards his favourite. "There you sit, as silent and reserved as possible—although the wine is exhilarating and the topic of discourse exciting to a degree."

"I was listening with attention, sir, to the various remarks passing around," said Sackville. "But with respect to Miss Venetia Trelawney, I have already spoken in eulogistic terms of her to your Royal Highness. In fact, it is impossible to have seen her once, without thinking of her ever afterwards."

"And how often have you seen her, Horace?" inquired the Prince.

"Perhaps a dozen times, sir," was the response: and a flush passed over the naturally pale countenance of Horace Sackville.

"Is she really as beautiful as our friends here have represented?" asked the Prince Regent: "and do you also think she is virtuous and well-intentioned?"

"No language is sufficiently powerful to do justice to her loveliness," said Horace: "and as for her virtue and respectability, I should think that, after the anecdote we have heard relative to the Duke's cheque, your Royal Highness would alone succeed in winning the favours of the adorable Venetia."

"Upon what basis do you found your argument, Horace?" asked the Regent, smilingly complacently.

"Upon the fact that if Miss Trelawney had rejected the proposals of a Duke, she can only be triumphed over by a Prince who will sooner or later become a King:"—and as Horace Sackville gave this explanation, he narrowly watched the effect upon his royal patron.

"By heavens! you almost persuade me to undertake the conquest of this fair one," said the Prince. "But what if she be intent only on forming some brilliant match? It would be but natural—and hence the extreme circumspection of her conduct."

"If marriage were her particular aim," remarked Horace Sackville, "she could doubtless have accomplished it long ago. Such charms as her's do not go begging. Besides—it is well known that she has refused several splendid offers——"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "How can this be known? And if it is so, then must she be acquainted with the noblemen or gentlemen whose suit she has rejected—and surely at least one of these discarded adorers would be amongst the circle of our friends: whereas not a soul now present has been enabled to obtain an introduction to her."

"I only repeated one of the rumours current relative to Venetia," said Sackville, assuming a careless tone and indifferent manner. "But I fancy there can be no doubt that Miss Trelawney has received several brilliant offers, though coming from individuals who are personally unknown to her, but who, being captivated by her loveliness, have presumed on their rank and fortune to write tender billets laying their hearts at her feet."

"And from the refusals experienced, you naturally infer that she has no particular ambition with regard to marriage?" said the Prince Regent; interrogatively.

"We are all delivering our opinions, such as we have formed them," answered Sackville: "and after all, seeing how little we know of the lady, our ideas concerning her can only be the veriest conjectures. Well, then, my belief is that Venetia is a being whose mind must be as extraordinary as her beauty: and inasmuch as she has rejected many brilliant offers of marriage—or at all events, as it is quite clear that endowed as she is with such transcendent loveliness, it must be her own fault that she is still single—there are but two inferences to draw."

"What are they?" inquired the Prince Regent.

"Either that she possesses a mind so pure that she is resolved never to bestow her hand where she cannot give her heart likewise," said Horace: "or else that she cherishes a towering ambition, which soars even above marriage and which prompted her to decline the opportunity of becoming the mistress of a Duke."

"Then what on earth could she hope to become?" demanded the Regent.

"The mistress of a Prince or a King," returned Horace: and the sidelong glance which he threw rapidly upon his royal patron, was of searching and penetrating keenness.

"You rogue!" ejaculated the Regent, bursting out into a good-natured laugh and laying his hand on Sackville's shoulder,—"you wish to persuade

me into undertaking the conquest of this mysterious fair one? Come—don't deny it—I see that such is your aim; and I dare say you think there will be fine sport and exciting amusement."

"Really, sir," faltered Horace Sackville, blushing deeply and looking much confused, "I hope——"

"Hope, my dear young friend!—what, hope you have not given me offence, eh?" exclaimed the Prince Regent. "On the contrary, I ought to be flattered by the idea which you have formed to the effect that if any one succeeds in obtaining the smiles of the beauteous Venetia Trelawney, I shall be the man. But suppose your belief to be well founded, I am not going to monopolise for myself all chances of possessing the charmer;—and if I do enter upon this love-campaign, it shall not be to the exclusion of my friends."

"But there is not a soul now present," said the Earl of Curzon, "who has not entertained views and hopes with regard to Venetia: and surely, sir, you do not mean that we should all launch out into bold and active rivalry with your Royal Highness?"

"Indeed, but I do though," exclaimed the Regent: "and since we are to have sport, let it be of the most thrillingly exciting character. What say you? Shall we all start upon equal terms in the race, with love and beauty as the prize?"

"Capital! capital!" cried the dissipated baronet. "A bumper of Burgundy to welcome the happy thought!"

"Yes—the proposal is not bad, by any means," drawled forth Colonel Malpas, as he caressed his moustache.

"I am quite agreeable to it," said the Earl of Curzon.

"And I am one in the race, remember," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson. "But what says Sackville?"

"Oh! he will be a gladiator likewise, in this warfare of love," cried the Prince Regent.

"Assuredly, sir," returned Horace—but with a significant expression of countenance, which however passed unnoticed in the general excitement created by the proposition of his Royal Highness.

"Now, my good friends," resumed the Prince, "it is absolutely necessary that we should propound and agree to some general rules to be observed in this love-campaign: otherwise we shall be clashing with each other in a manner that must inevitably lead to confusion and expose us all to ridicule."

"Hear! hear!" cried the attentive listeners.

"Let us, then, begin with the understanding that we preserve an inviolable secrecy relative to our compact," proceeded his Royal Highness; "and that we also forbear from any sinister or illegitimate means of undermining each other."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the voices of the rest.

"And inasmuch as perhaps some of us, if not all," continued the Regent, "may by various means succeed in procuring an introduction to Miss Trelawney, the result of which may be to obtain permission to call at Acacia Cottage,—will it not be as well if we make arrangements so as to preclude the chance of two or more of us meeting there at the same time?"

"But how can this be accomplished?" inquired the Earl of Curzon.

"Easily enough," answered the Prince Regent. "There are six of us—and there are six days in the week, excluding Sunday. Let a particular day be allotted to each for making calls, sending presents, serenading, or taking any steps in which there might be a possibility of clashing with similar proceedings on the part of the rest. For instance, Monday for one—Tuesday for another——"

"The proposal is excellent!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I shall stamp my approval of it in a bumper."

"Yes—the proposal is good enough," drawled forth Colonel Malpas. "But how shall we allot the days?"

"According to rank," returned the baronet.

"Oh! fie," ejaculated the Prince. "How do you think I would agree to a plan which would place me first upon the list—I, who have disavowed all monopoly and repudiated all selfishness in the proceeding! No—let us ballot fairly. Come, Horace—write all our names on pieces of paper; and toss them into a vase or urn."

This was done: and as the Prince called the six days one after the other, the names were individually drawn forth from the splendid porcelain vase into which the pieces of paper whereon they had been written were flung. The following was the result:—

Monday—The Earl of Curzon.
Tuesday—Sir Douglas Huntingdon.
Wednesday—Colonel Malpas.
Thursday—The Prince Regent.
Friday—The Marquis of Leveson.
Saturday—Mr. Sackville.

The announcements were received one after another with much merriment; and the order wherein the names stood, gave rise to many witty jokes, repartees, and humourous retorts. The wine circulated freely; and bumpers were drained to the health of Venetia Trelawney.

"By the bye, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness, as an idea struck him during a pause in the conversation and a temporary lull in the hilarity,—"I do not think that we have made our arrangements as complete as they might be rendered. Because it does not strike me as fair that if one of us should succeed in gaining the favours of this charmer, the rest should continue to persecute her with their importunities. Besides, the successful lover would naturally desire to enjoy the privilege of visiting his mistress as often and whenever he chose, without being limited to one special day in every week. And lastly, as we are all starting in the same race, it would be but just and natural that we should know *who* wins and *when* he wins."

"Most assuredly!" cried the baronet. "I wonder that these points did not strike any of us before. Our compact would be wretchedly deficient without the settlement of such important matters."

"And should not the victor receive a testimonial in acknowledgment of his skill, tact, and perseverance?" exclaimed Colonel Malpas, abandoning the habitual drawl in his anxiety to proffer this suggestion—by which, we imagine, he was vain enough to hope that he should be certain to profit.

"Venetia Trelawney and six thousand guineas would be no mean reward to crown a man's labours," said the Earl of Curzon. "What is the general opinion? Shall we make a sweepstake for six thousand——a thousand a-piece?"

"With all my heart," exclaimed the Prince. "The Marquis of Leveson will act as treasurer; and by twelve o'clock to-morrow we must each send our cheque to his lordship for the amount. I will remit Sackville's along with my own, as I have some money of his in my hands just at present."

Horace threw a look of gratitude upon the Prince in acknowledgment of this delicate manner of paying for him—the truth being, as a matter of course, that His Royal Highness held no funds belonging to his youthful favourite.

"Now, then," said the baronet, "we thoroughly understand ourselves thus far. Six thousand guineas are to be subscribed as a sweepstakes to be given to the fortunate individual who shall make Venetia Trelawney his mistress. But the proof of the conquest?" he added inquiringly.

"Oh! some proof satisfactory to the rest must be afforded by the victor, as a matter of course," observed the Prince. "But that will depend upon circumstances. At all events, whenever the siege is at an end, and the citadel has surrendered, the happy conqueror should hold himself bound to communicate the fact to the rest——"

"He must give a banquet," suggested the Earl of Curzon, "at which the proofs of his victory will be adduced—be they letters, or whatever they may: and then the six thousand guineas will be duly handed over to him."

"The compact is now as perfect as six clever fellows can possibly make it," said the baronet. "Pass the bottle, Sackville."

And the bottle was passed and re-passed again and again, until all present, with the exception of Horace, were in such a happy condition that if asked whether they stood upon their heads or their heels, they could not have very easily responded to the query.

CHAPTER II.

VENETIA.

It was the Monday following the banquet given at the Marquis of Leveson's house; and at about nine o'clock in the morning Venetia Trelawney was breakfasting in an elegantly-furnished boudoir at Acacia Cottage.

She was alone, and in the most charming deshabillée: or, to speak more correctly, having just stepped forth from the bed-chamber adjoining, and fearful of no intrusive gaze, she was in the most negligent undress.

As her splendid form lounged half reclining upon a sofa, the downy cushions of which softly yielded to her pressure, an undefinable air of voluptuous langnor seemed to characterise her whole person. The bright shoulders were completely bare; and the superb bust was every now and then as fully exposed, when the slightest movement displaced the muslin wrapper which she had so loosely thrown on.

On rising from her couch she had taken a bath; and her skin shone with a healthy animation that rendered her complexion absolutely dazzling in its transparent brightness. Upon her cheeks was that rich bloom which, far from deepening into ruddiness, was still sufficiently glowing to resemble the tint of the carnation gently combined with the vermeil of the peach. Nothing could be more exquisite than the transition with which that natural hue softened into roseate delicacy, which in its turn blended imperceptibly with the whiteness of the lily:—and on the forehead, the neck, and the bosom, the meandering veins delineated all those shades of azure which the enraptured eye loves to follow beneath the polished surface of the skin.

Venetia's countenance was a perfect oval: but notwithstanding its shape was thus fitted for a beauty of the highest order of intellectuality, it had that expression which, without being positively sleepy—much less heavy, was still full of the soft langour that steals upon the senses like the perfume of flowers on a sultry day. This effect, too, was enhanced by the slow and languishing motion of the eyes, which were not particularly large, but of the deepest, tenderest, most melting blue.

And those eyes,—as they looked forth from beneath their softly drooping lids, fringed with dark brown lashes slightly curling,—how full of love did their depths appear to be,—as if young Cupid had made his home there even before he had asserted his empire over Venetia's heart! Yet those looks were not absolutely wanton—much less did they flash with the fires of passion: but they beamed softly with a seductiveness all their own—and there was the subdued lustre of a nascent voluptousness in their deep languid gaze.

The brows that arched above those eyes were finely pencilled and well divided: and above them rose the handsome forehead which was polished as marble, without the marble's cold and settled inanimation. Her hair was of that superb auburn which in the sunshine resembles burnished gold, and in the shade wears upon its darkened surface the rich gloss that gives it the appearance of velvet smoothness. Of exceeding thickness in its luxuriant copiousness, but of exquisite fineness in the myriad filaments that made up the gorgeous mass, it was arranged in bands deepening lower than the ears, and was then gathered in a knot at the back of the well-shaped head.

But we have not yet terminated the description of Venetia's countenance. Her profile was of faultless regularity: the nose was straight and united with the forehead in that classic outline which leaves only a slight inflection to be seen. Her mouth was small and beautifully chiselled: the curve of the upper lip resembled that of Cupid's bow—while the lower lip was fuller, and slightly pouting, so that it left between its ripe richness and the chin that gentle hollow which imparts to the latter a more perfect roundness. These lips were of a delicious redness, moist as a dewy flower and luscious as a fruit of the tropics: and remaining habitually the least thing apart, they not only revealed glimpses of the brilliant teeth, but likewise added to the softly sensuous expression of the countenance.

Venetia was tall in stature—above the middle height of woman. To say that she was finely formed, would be but to convey a poor idea of the actual grandeur of her proportions. Though retaining all the first freshness of youth, and with the virgin roundness and plumpness of the contours perfectly unmarred, her shape had expanded into the glowing luxuriance of womanhood. Still was its symmetry so just—so admirable, that the sternest critic could not have desired any one charm to be diminished in

its ripe fulness or pared down on the plea of exuberance. For if the shoulders were softly rounded—if the bust developed itself in superb amplitude and swelling volume—if the arms were robust—and if the folds of the drapery described a proportionate fulness in the lower limbs,—yet was the symmetry of the whole form preserved in a harmonious perfection which left nothing to cavil at—nothing to desire!

Such was Venetia Trelawney—the young lady whose charms had been so fully discussed at the mansion of Lord Leveson, and who had become the subject of the singular agreement entered into on that occasion.

We said she was seated alone in a handsomely furnished boudoir;—and we must here observe that her residence, which bore the delightful name of Acacia Cottage, was fitted up with corresponding elegance throughout. It stood in such a position at Knightsbridge that the back windows looked upon Hyde Park, from which however the house itself was separated by a small garden.

Yet though surrounded by every comfort and even every luxury,—though possessing her carriage, and having the means of gratifying any whim or fancy which money could minister to,—and though endowed with that rare loveliness which was in itself a talisman capable of ensuring to its owner as brilliant and honourable a position as she could well aspire to,—notwithstanding all these advantages, Venetia was not entirely happy.

As she sate in her elegantly-furnished room, she frequently surprised herself in the act of heaving a sigh: and if she murmured within the depths of her soul, "I have all that I need to render me happy," there still would pass into her heart a feeling to remind her that something was wanting to stamp with truth the inwardly expressed thought. And sometimes a cloud would gather upon her brow and cast its shade over her features—and the expression of her countenance would deepen from languor into despondency. Then, starting at the end of a few minutes from a painful reverie, she would exert a strong effort to fling off that gloom;—and by throwing a glance upon a mirror facing where she indolently reclined, her vanity would be gratified by the contemplation of her own enchanting loveliness, as well as by the promises which the possession of such beauty seemed to hold forth to her exalted fancy. Then smiles would dispel the gloom from her countenance—and her features would become radiant, even to absorb that sweet drdoping languor which was their wonted expression.

But what was the cause of Venetia's intervals of transitory sorrow? Was she conscious of some duty unfulfilled, or of some fault committed? Had she lost that innocence which is the pearl beyond all price, and which far exceeds the value of meretricious diamonds that may deck the brow of beauty? Or was she only trembling lest her virtue, hitherto preserved, should succumb to temptation? Had she taken some false step?—or did she feel herself in peril of taking it? Or again, did she deplore a separation from beings who were dear to her?—or lastly, was she agitated by the conflicting fears and hopes of love?

As yet we are unable to penetrate the mystery of her sorrow. But pity it was that her thoughts were not ever glowing, sunny, and enchanting as her own inimitable beauty!—pity it was that care, which had not ventured to trace a single line on her smooth and polished brow, should have been able to tighten a single chord that oscillated in her heart!

Let us suppose that it is three or four hours later on this particular day when we introduce our readers to Acacia Cottage. It is now, then, one o'clock in the afternoon;—and Venetia has gone through the routine of the toilette. Jessica, the lady's-maid—a quiet, reserved, but shrewd and faithful young woman—takes a delight in setting off the charms of her mistress to their greatest advantage. Not that they need the embellishment of art, nor the aid of factitious adornment: but still dress may develop the beauties and enhance the graces of the person, as well as mar the effect of the former or conceal the latter altogether. And therefore Jessica was well pleased when her skill had proved worthy of the being on whose toilette it was bestowed. On the present occasion the abigail was eminently successful; and if Venetia had appeared so enchantingly beautiful in her morning *negligée*, she was not less so in a more studied costume.

Indeed, it was now that the dark silk dress which she wore displayed all the admirable harmony in the proportions of her form that we have previously endeavoured to describe: for the body of that dress was made to fit close, so that it seemed to borrow its own shape from the contours of her bust, rather than assist in any way to determine the effect of those flowing outlines. Moreover, the long skirt of the robe, reaching to the carpet on which she trod, furnished an idea of the sweeping length of limb which it nevertheless concealed, and by apparently adding to her stature, gave her a more imposing beauty.

With her charms thus set off to their fullest advantage, did Venetia repair from the boudoir to the drawing-room. She was now sunny with smiles as well as radiant in beauty; and there was a certain roguish archness in her look which seemed to intimate that she was prepared for some innocent piece of mischief.

The drawing-room occupied the first floor of the house—extending from front to back, and having windows that faced the park as well as the street. Those casements that commanded a view of the park, and indeed overlooked the little garden behind the Cottage, were now open: for the weather was beautiful and warm, and the air was filled with the fragrance of the autumn flowers that seemed to drink in the sun-light to replenish their brilliant hues.

Jessica had followed her mistress from the boudoir as far as the drawing-room door; and when Venetia, on looking into the apartment, saw that it was unoccupied, she turned towards her abigail, saying, "Where is Mrs. Arbuthnot?"

"I believe, ma'am, that she has gone to Stratton Street," replied Jessica. "But shall I ask down stairs?"

"No—it is not of any consequence," observed Venetia, whose voice was as full of melting melody as the most delicious music. "And yet I should have thought that she would remain near me at the present moment," she added—but in a low tone, as the remark was intended for herself, and not to be addressed to the abigail.

Jessica withdrew—and Miss Trelawney entered

the drawing-room, closing the door behind her. The smiles, which had for a moment fled on hearing that Mrs. Arbuthnot was not at home, now returned to her countenance;—and advancing towards the mirror, she surveyed herself with looks of joyous triumph. But suddenly altering the expression of her features, she assumed an air of haughty indignation—then of proud defiance—and then of cold contempt. Nothing could be more perfect than the manner in which she thus tutored her charming countenance to put on each successive look—especially as there was no ostensible cause to excite the feelings which those looks expressed. Nor indeed did she experience any such sentiments at the moment: for suddenly bursting into a melodious laugh, which rang merrily through the room, she flung herself upon a sofa, exclaiming, "What an excellent actress I should make!"

When her mirth had subsided, Venetia rose and advanced near one of the casements looking upon the street—or rather the Knightsbridge road: and concealing herself behind the curtain in such a manner that although she was able to see she could not herself be seen from without, she remained gazing from the casement for some minutes. But presently abandoning this position, she crossed the room and approached one of the open windows facing the park. Here she began to caress a beautiful parrot which stood upon a perch: and she likewise spoke playfully to a couple of canary-birds that were making the air tuneful from their gilt cages.

While thus occupied, Venetia observed that a gentleman had halted in the park, near the boundary-wall of her garden, and was gazing intently upon her. A sudden flush swept over her countenance as she thus caught sight of him: but without moving from the window—and indeed, without appearing to notice him at all—she continued to amuse herself with the parrot and the canaries.

Nevertheless, the veiled and sidelong glance which she from time to time flung, with rapid furtiveness, towards him, enabled her to perceive that he was a fine, tall, handsome man, of dark complexion, and apparently about thirty years of age.

Although this gentleman who was thus admiring her so steadfastly, was near enough to observe that she was of ravishing beauty, and even to form a very good idea of the particular style of this incomparable beauty, supposing him not to have been previously acquainted with it—yet was he too far off to notice either that transient flush which swept over Venetia's countenance, or the stolen looks which she ever and anon directed towards him. There he however stood, gazing up at her—while she, affecting to be utterly unconscious of the circumstance, remained at the window, toying most charmingly with her birds.

For the gentleman in the park there was something captivating and enchanting to a degree in the scene which that open casement presented to his view. The golden air which appeared to surround that beauteous woman as with a halo,—the bright flowers that bloomed in gaud and grandeur on the window-ledge,—the reflection of the powerful light in the handsome gilt cages of the birds,—and the roseate back-ground formed by the pink drapery showing through the muslin curtains that likewise formed part of the hangings,—all these details made up a picture so sunny, warm, and glowing, that the spectator felt every pulse thrilling with a beatific ecstacy and his heart throbbing with the bliss of ravished emotions.

But, ah! all on a sudden an ejaculation of dismay bursts from the lips of Venetia Trelawney—and the cause is at the same instant rendered apparent by the flight of her green and golden favourite from its superb cage. The parrot has escaped some how or other—and the whirr of his wings sounds through the sultry, heavy air. But, behold! the fugitive alights upon the garden-wall—the gentleman springs forward—and the next moment the bird is safe in his custody. Then, as he holds it gently but securely in both hands, he glances up at the window; and a gracious salutation rewards him for the deed which he has so triumphantly accomplished.

"It would almost appear as if some good genius had thus furnished me with an opportunity to obtain access to the fair one!" said the gentleman to himself, as he hastened round to the front door of Acacia Cottage: and still he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses, so providential appeared the accident which all in a moment bridged the gulf that an instant before had yawned between himself and Venetia.

The front door was already opened by the time the hero of this little incident reached it—and a livery-servant, both old and ugly, was standing there to receive the parrot. But the gentleman was not to be thus stayed on the threshold of that fairy-land of which he had hitherto obtained only far-off glimpses, but which he had now acquired a sort of right to enter.

"Having had the good fortune to catch the bird," he said to the footman, "you will permit me the happiness of restoring it with my own hands to its charming mistress."

The domestic bowed an assent, as if at once struck by the reasonable nature of the demand; and, without uttering a word, he led the way up a handsome staircase to the drawing-room. And as the gentleman, still holding the parrot with a tender care in his delicately gloved hands, followed the stately domestic, he said to himself with a feeling of satisfaction, "Venetia is at all events resolved that no opportunity shall be afforded for scandal by the presence of a young or good-looking footman in her establishment."

By the time he had made this reflection, the landing was gained: and as the domestic placed his hand upon the drawing-room door, he turned to ask, "Whom shall I have the honour to announce?"

The visitor mentioned his name; and the footman immediately threw open the door, exclaiming, "The Earl of Curzon!"

CHAPTER III.

MONDAY: OR, THE FIRST SUITOR.

Miss Trelawney advanced to meet the nobleman with a slight flush upon her cheek and a soft tremulousness throughout her entire form: but the first passed immediately away—and the latter was imperceptible. It therefore seemed as if she were influenced by no particular emotions, unless they were such as were natural under the circumstances:

namely, joy at the recovery of her favourite, and gratitude towards him who now restored it.

"I know not how to express my thanks to your lordship for this attention—this kindness on your part," she said, as she received the bird from his hands.

"I am more than adequately rewarded for so small a service by the happiness and honour of forming your acquaintance, Miss Trelawney," replied the Earl, his veins tingling as if floods of ecstacy were pouring into his entire being, as he felt the touch of Venetia's hands against his own—that momentary contact being unavoidable as she took the parrot from him.

"This naughty bird," she said, as if heedless of the Earl's response—or rather appearing to treat it as a mere passing compliment suggested by the ordinary gallantry of fashionable life,—"this naughty bird has given your lordship a great deal of trouble, and I am very angry with him. There, sir—go back to your cage—and I shall not fail to assure myself that the door is well fastened in future."

"It is a beautiful parrot, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, who had followed her to the extremity of the room where the cage stood at the open window; "and it would have been a pity to lose him. Are you fond of birds?"

"Yes—and of flowers—passionately," she replied, still bending over the cage, so that the nobleman's enraptured eyes had leisure and opportunity to wander over the superb form which thus remained in an attitude so well adapted to display every contour and set off every grace.

"And yet the birds cannot fully appreciate, while the flowers are of course inanimately unable to comprehend, all this love which you bestow upon them!" said the Earl, rendering his voice soft and plaintive.

"It would really seem as if the parrot at all events was particularly ungrateful," observed Venetia, now raising her head and turning her eyes towards the Earl: but instantly reverting her looks to the cage, she said, "And yet the endeavour of the poor little being to escape, is only the reward which we selfish mortals ought to expect for our cruelty in bringing it away from its native clime, and shutting it up in this gilded prison."

"Do you consider yourself cruel, then, in keeping these birds in confinement, Miss Trelawney?" asked the nobleman, scarcely able to conceal the fond ardour of the looks with which he was devouring her.

"Most certainly," she exclaimed. "And yet I have not the courage to dispense with my favourites on that account. Besides, were I to get rid of them, they might possibly fall into the hands of others who would not treat them so kindly as I."

"Henceforth I shall hate that parrot of your's, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, with a look of mysterious significancy.

"Hate him! and why so?" she demanded, in astonishment.

"Because of his ingratitude towards you," rejoined the nobleman. "Would that I were the parrot, to be the object of so much tender solicitude——"

Miss Trelawney burst out laughing—and the Earl was covered with confusion. The compliment which he fancied to be so well-turned and to convey by innuendo so delicate an avowal of his love, was received as a jest and treated with mirthfulness. His pride was wounded—and, man of the world though he was, he felt quite abashed.

"The idea was so excessively singular," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance glowing with the rich carnation that her merriment had conjured up: and, as if fatigued by the exertion of laughing, she seated herself on a sofa.

"May I be permitted to explain my meaning?" said the Earl, now putting the best possible face upon the matter and forcing himself to smile.

"I think your lordship was explicit enough," replied Venetia, with the most provoking yet charming maliciousness—so that if the Earl had wished to avenge himself, he could only have done so by killing her with kisses. "You expressed an anxiety to become a parrot——"

"*Your* parrot, Miss Trelawney," interrupted the nobleman, dropping with apparent negligence into a chair, as if he considered that the discourse had taken a turn which was likely to prolong it and therefore warranted him to be seated.

"Well, my lord," continued the lady, the smile which still lingered upon her lips revealing the rows of pearls within,—"you wished to be my parrot. Now you must really take me for a very vain—a very foolish—and very silly person, if you fancy that I can be pleased with such a compliment."

"Not for worlds would I *displease* you, Miss Trelawney!" ejaculated the Earl, with a strong accent on the first syllable of the verb. "But I am delighted to find that you are so superior to the ordinary frivolities and idle gallantries of the day. It would be terrible indeed were a false diamond contained within so glorious a casket!"

"Another compliment!" she exclaimed, laughing. "But you will tell me when you are speaking seriously—otherwise I shall never know."

"I am speaking seriously—most seriously," said the Earl, with a look of ineffable adoration, "when I declare that you are a being for whom it were elysian happiness to live and a sainted duty to die!"

"But I require no one to die for me, my lord!" exclaimed Venetia, with looks of amazement and uncertainty—as if she were astonished at his words, but could scarcely believe that her ears had caught their sense aright.

"Then will you bid me live for you?" asked the Earl, with a movement as if he were about to fall at her feet.

"I do not understand your lordship," she said, rising from the sofa and drawing herself up to the full of her imposing height: but at the same time her looks were bent down; and her attitude was that of one who awaits an explanation which is indispensable.

"Miss Trelawney," returned the Earl of Curzon, likewise leaving his seat, and speaking in a voice which was full of unfeigned emotions,—"if you know that you are beautiful and that beauty touches the heart, then can you scarcely be at a loss to comprehend the meaning of my words."

Venetia raised her eyes slowly and fixed them upon the Earl with precisely that look of haughty indignation which she had ere now practised in the mirror. But she remained silent, as if willing to assure herself ere giving verbal expression to her anger, that she was not mistaken as to the sense and significancy of his speech.

"Listen to me, I implore you, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, joining his hands and assuming a look of the most passionate entreaty.

"Proceed, my lord," she observed, in a cold tone and with a dignified reserve of manner, as she resumed her seat upon the sofa.

"Will you promise to hear me patiently and without interruption to the end?" asked Curzon, in a tone of appeal that was even as self-humiliating as if he were about to demand pardon for a crime.

"I will pledge myself to nothing, my lord," said Venetia. "And now the idea strikes me that it is altogether preposterous—incredible—unheard of, that so serious a conversation should arise between individuals who meet for the first time—who have not known each other quite twenty minutes—and whom the merest accident in the world brought together at all."

"It is strange, no doubt—and my conduct must appear extraordinary to a degree," returned the nobleman. "But once more I beseech you to give me a hearing and allow me to explain—perhaps to justify—myself."

"Had you not rendered me a service ere now my lord," said Venetia, "I should at once refuse your request. But as you presume upon the obligation under which you have laid me, I have no alternative than to listen."

"Ah! Miss Trelawney," cried the Earl, now pained and grieved by the rebuke which had been conveyed in terms so cutting and yet at the same time so dignified and so thoroughly lady-like,—"if you place the matter in that point of view, I must at once retire, crushed and humiliated, from your presence! But I cannot think you so ungenerous as to refuse me the opportunity of an explanation upon terms that shall be totally irrespective of any little service which I may have been fortunate enough to render What is your decision, Miss Trelawney?"

"Proceed, my lord," she answered, with a cold courtesy. "I will hear you on the terms you name."

"A thousand thanks!" cried the Earl, with enthusiasm. "Imagine not, Miss Trelawney, that this is the first occasion on which I have ever seen you. Since your arrival in the metropolis——"

"My arrival in the metropolis!" she exclaimed. "Why, my lord, I have lived in London all my life—from my very birth!"

"Indeed!" he ejaculated, in astonishment. "And yet the world knew you not until within the last few weeks——"

"What world does your lordship speak of?" inquired Venetia, with a look of most bewitching ingenuousness.

"The fashionable world, Miss Trelawney—the only world in which one can possibly exist, without being confounded amongst the ordinary race of mortals."

"Ah! then, this is a world of your own creating?" she said, with a tinge of irony in her voice, and with that coldly contemptuous look which she had also practised in her mirror.

"Not of my special creating, Miss Trelawney," returned the nobleman: "but a world—in fine, the sphere of fashion—the—the——"

"A singular world which is so difficult to be defined!" ejaculated Venetia. "But am I to suppose that because I have removed from the seclusion in which I was brought up from my infancy—and because, being left my own mistress by the death of my parents, I have chosen to fix my habitation in the vicinage of a park,—am I to understand, I ask, that because of all this, my position in life is changed and that I am launched as it were into what you would have me believe to be a new world?"

"What I wished you to understand, Miss Trelawney, was that your beauty, your accomplishments, your manners, and your fortune render you one of *us*—the *élite* of society—the aristocracy of the community," explained the Earl: "and I was going to observe that it was only since you came into your proper sphere a few weeks ago, that the fashionable world knew of your existence. But from the first moment that you thus condescended to appear amongst us, I have never ceased to think of you. Your image has remained impressed upon my mind: it has become the object of my contemplation by day, and of my dreams by night. I have ridden for hours round and round the park to await your appearance and catch a glimpse of your countenance as you dashed by in your charming equipage: and I have applied to every friend or acquaintance I could think of, in the hope of procuring an introduction to you. But I did not succeed: no one that I knew was more fortunate than myself in this respect. Every one was admiring you—worshipping you from a distance—talking of you—and eulogising your charms: but no one had the honour of being acquainted with you. I was almost driven to madness—and I began to wander about on foot, like one demented. In this mood was I passing through the park ere now, when I beheld you at the window. I remained to gaze upon you—to contemplate you with that idolatry which is the natural homage of a loving heart. Whether you observed me, I know not: but you stayed at the window——"

"Had I noticed your lordship," said Venetia, in a cold tone, and with haughty manner, "I should have retired from the casement. But you have already proceeded far enough—too far—with your explanations: and as no earthly good can possibly result from them, either to your lordship or to me, I may be pardoned for observing that our interview need last no longer."

And once more rising from her seat, Miss Trelawney advanced towards the bell-pull.

"No—do not order me from your presence!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "Spare me that indignity at least."

"Or rather, let your lordship spare me the necessity of submitting you to it," said Venetia, in a tone of dignified calmness.

"Will you not hear me for one minute longer?" cried the Earl, evidently labouring under the strongest excitement: then, without waiting for a response, he proceeded to observe in a hurried manner, "It is not in the power of mortal to subdue his feelings at all times—and you should rather pity than blame me! The generous warrior when triumphing over a vanquished foe, uses his victory with moderation and tempers the pride of his conquest with mercy. Behold me, then, subdued—defeated—overcome by the brilliancy of your beauty: and surely, surely you will not spurn me from you?"

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon sank upon his knees in the presence of that lady of dazzling loveliness.

The flush of triumph swept across her magnificent countenance—the gratification of woman's loftiest vanity wreathed her lips into a smile for a single moment—and for a moment also did the same feeling flash from beneath her darkly fringed eye-lids. But this display of emotion was so transitory that the next instant, when it had passed away, the Earl was still left in a sort of pleasing painful doubt as to whether Venetia had thus been really moved at all by that sentiment which constituted the weakness of her sex, or whether it were a mere illusion on his part.

"Behold me at your feet, angelic woman!" he exclaimed, his upturned countenance expressing the fond ardour of his rapturous devotion and earnest hope even more eloquently than the impassioned accents of his voice.

"Rise, my lord—let us resume our seats—and we will discuss the question more rationally and more deliberately," said Miss Trelawney, with such perfect self-possession of manner and calmness of tone that the Earl gazed upon her in mute wonder and bewilderment as he rose from his supplicating posture.

A thousand ideas swept through his imagination all in a moment. Was she really moved by his proceedings?—had his looks, his words, and his conduct touched her heart?—and had she all along intended to yield, after a due amount of charming coquetry, feigned indignation, and artful prudery? Did she consider that the sentimental portion of the drama had gone far enough?—and was she about to bargain methodically relative to the terms on which she would consent to become his mistress? Or had she merely adopted a stratagem in order to induce him to abandon that suppliant position in which she feared that he might perhaps be surprised by some one entering

the room? In fine, was she an intriguing adventuress who had feigned a desperate resistance with a view to enhance the charm, the value, and the excitement of an eventual surrender?—or was she really a woman of virtue and character, summoning all her presence of mind to aid in crushing the arrogant pretensions which he had dared to proffer?

With the more than lightning speed at which thought alone can travel; did these reflections gush through the mind of the Earl as he rose from his knees and fixed his looks in mingled amazement and doubt upon the incomprehensible beauty. She moved towards an arm-chair—and as he followed her with his eyes and dwelt on the swimming voluptuousness of her gait, his impure imagination at once suggested that a being of such glowing beauty and capable of exciting such sensuous rapture in the soul, could not herself be indifferent to love's enjoyment nor inexperienced in its ways. Nurtured in the midst of fashionable profligacy and high-life demoralisation, it was not astonishing if the Earl of Curzon at no time entertained a particularly exalted opinion of female virtue;—and on the present occasion his excited feelings and inflamed temperament, aided by his personal vanity and conceit, led him to imagine and to hope that the scene had inspired the lady with sensations akin to those that were thrilling to his own heart's core.

She seated herself in the arm-chair;—and the moment that her countenance was again turned towards the Earl, his eyes greedily and searchingly sought to read in her looks whether there was really a covert levity in her manner and a subdued wantonness in her breast. But as if she penetrated his design and scorned the imputation which it conveyed her features again assumed that look of sovereign hauteur which they had ere now put on and which had been so successfully practised in the mirror before the Earl's arrival.

"Be seated, my lord," she said, pointing with a queen-like imperiousness of gesture towards a chair at some distance from that which she had just taken.

"You are a judge—about to pronounce my doom," exclaimed the nobleman, as he retreated to the chair which she thus indicated. "But I implore you to have mercy upon one whom your charms have bound captive, and whom your decision will either elevate to elysian happiness or plunge into the darkest despair."

"A truce to this extravagant poetising, my lord," said Venetia, in a cold voice and with a dignified look. "You have already indulged in too many meaningless phrases and empty flatteries; and I am not going to answer you in the style of those pretty nothings which gentlemen and ladies toss from one to the other with so much elegant ease in the conversations of fashionable life."

"By all means, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, "let the discourse become as serious as you will: for when the subject of love is solemnly dealt with, there is every hope for the impassioned lover."

"And your lordship, then, seriously and solemnly avows an affection towards me?" observed Miss Trelawney, with a look as calmly sedate as her question was business-like and pointed.

"On my soul I love you passionately—I adore you!" exclaimed the Earl, placing his right hand upon his breast and once more making a movement as if he were about to rush forward and fall at her feet.

"I accept your answer as a sober avowal and a deliberate affirmative," said Venetia, with an imperious gesture that commanded him to retain his seat: then, with an air of the calmest and fullest self-possession, she observed, "I presume that when your lordship sought my presence just now, instead of delivering the bird to the domestic at the door, it was with the intention of thus honouring me by a proposal of marriage?"

"Marriage!" echoed the Earl, startled by a word the mention of which seemed to imply a terrible misconception on Miss Trelawney's part, and at the same time involved himself in a most awkward dilemma as to the terms in which he must now explain the views and hopes that had all along animated him.

"Yes—marriage, to be sure," said the lady. "Have you not just made me an offer of marriage as intelligibly as words could possibly convey such a proposal?"

"Marriage!" repeated the nobleman, confused and bewildered. "Really, Miss Trelawney—we have been misunderstanding each other——Oh! my dearest Venetia, why tantalise me thus cruelly?" he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of excitement: "why torture me——"

But he stopped short—amazed, if not positively overawed by the look of grand dignity and sublime indignation which Venetia bent upon him as she slowly rose from her chair.

"Explain your meaning, my lord, when you dared to avow that you loved me!" she said, in a voice admirably befitting that imposing air.

"Is it possible that you did not understand me?" he exclaimed, half in terror that the scene was genuine on her side—and half in hope that it was a mere pleasantry to which she would speedily put an end by dissolving into smiles and sinking into his arms.

"When an honourable man tells a woman of stainless character that he loves her," was Venetia's dignified response, "there can be no misunderstanding as to the meaning of his words."

"But wherefore—Oh! wherefore allude to those trammels which the world denominates *marriage*?" exclaimed the Earl. "Wherefore——"

"Stop, my lord!" said the lady, with another imperious gesture. "Did you intend to proffer marriage to me—yes or no? Spare evasion—avoid subterfuge—and give me a direct reply in a monosyllable."

"Marriage, my dear Venetia ——"

"Your answer, my lord—yes or no?"

"But I must explain ——"

"Your answer, I say! Yes or no?"—and while her countenance flushed with the richest, warmest glow, she stamped her foot impatiently upon the carpet.

"Venetia, you cannot be ignorant of the fact that I am already married," said the Earl,—"but to a woman whom I do not love—whereas I adore and worship you! Oh! be not angry with me——"

"Enough, my lord!" cried the lady abruptly: and her whole form appeared to dilate with the dignity of an offended, outraged woman—but a dignity which rather asserted itself through the medium of a withering scorn than a fiery indigna-

tion, as if conscious of its own sufficiency for all purposes of self-defence. "I knew beforehand that you were married:—but, inasmuch as your importunity was amounting to persecution and surpassing even the limits of a coxcomb's insolence, I resolved to give your lordship a lesson that may perhaps prove salutary. Depart, then—or I will summon my lacqueys to thrust you forth from the dwelling!"

"You are serious, madam?" exclaimed the Earl, affecting to doubt that she was so—but at the same time his countenance was crimsoned with rage, spite, and disappointment.

"Dare not remain to bandy words with me, my lord!" returned Venetia, still preserving the goddess-like dignity of a Juno, so that she lost not her temper for a single moment. "Depart!"—and she extended her superb arm towards the door.

"Then you *are* in earnest!" said Lord Curzon, a fiendish malignity appearing upon that countenance which, naturally so handsome, was for a few moments distorted by this diabolical expression: and as Satan's self seemed to look out of his large dark eyes, from beneath the corrugated brows, he observed in a voice that was hoarse with concentrated passion, "Venetia, you shall repent of this! I have sworn to possess you—and I will keep my vow! Be you guarded by all the angels of heaven, I will invoke all the devils of hell to succour me in carrying out my resolve!"

But while he was yet giving utterance to this threat alike so tremendous and so atrocious, there appeared upon the countenance of Venetia Trelawney that look of proud defiance which she had also practised in the mirror, and which she now assumed for the purpose of convincing her enemy how little she valued his menaced hostility.

"By heaven! your pride shall be humbled, haughty fair one!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon, furious with rage: and, darting upon her a terrible look, he rushed from the room.

Venetia rang the bell in order that the domestic might be in attendance to open the front door for his lordship: and as the tinkling sound met his ears, it reminded him that no act of cowardice could possibly be more brutal than to precipitate himself down stairs and fling himself out of the house in a manner so little suitable to a lady's dwelling. He accordingly stifled his rage as well as he was able—moderated his pace—and quitted Acacia Cottage in a manner that was not calculated to arouse any strange suspicions in the mind of the serious-looking domestic.

As for Venetia—the instant she heard the front door close behind the Earl of Curzon, she no longer restrained the free vent which her feelings sought;—and throwing herself upon the sofa, she gave way—not to tears, gentle reader—oh! no—but to a peal of laughter so unfeignedly merry that it rang in its musical intonations through the room until the very atmosphere seemed laden with the harmony of that splendid being's mirth.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN TASH AND HIS MAN ROMEO.

As the Earl of Curzon issued forth from the front door of Acacia Cottage, an individual of somewhat different appearance emerged from the portals of a public-house nearly opposite.

The person just mentioned and whom we must pause to introduce to our readers, was a man of about forty—of middle height—and stoutly, though by no means clumsily built. He had dark hair—fierce moustachios—and enormous black whiskers, exceedingly bushy and meeting beneath his chin. His brows were thick and overhanging—his eyes were small, dark, and of a peculiarly bold expression—and his face was of that rubicund complexion which seemed to owe its hue to the influence of the brandy-bottle rather than to the natural ruddiness of a vigorous health.

This personage was dressed in what would now-a-days be called the "shabby-genteel" style. He wore a blue frock-coat buttoned up to the throat, and the stand-up collar of which was fastened by means of hooks and eyes. A black polished leathern stock, over which no collar peeped, seemed purposely intended to sustain the wearer's head in a fixed position—so tight, so high, and so stiff was that article of the gentleman's attire. Not a vestige of linen was to be seen in the shape of wristbands any more than in the form of collar: and it was therefore left to the imagination of the beholder to determine whether the gentleman wore any shirt at all. His trousers were light grey, strapped very tightly over a pair of boots with enormous high heels, to which a pair of immense steel spurs were fastened. His hat was tall and expanded to a remarkable degree in the crown: the brims were large, curled up at the sides, but hanging over considerably both before and behind. He wore a soiled pair of buckskin gloves; and in his right hand he carried a stick with a tolerably large knob, and which looked amazingly as if it were "loaded" after the fashion of a life-preserver—or, in other words, as if that knob, apparently intended for ornament, was in reality filled with lead.

The garments of this gentleman were soiled and thread-bare, although he wore them with an air of as much satisfaction as if they were a bran new suit. But perhaps he fancied that an insolent demeanour, a swaggering gait, and a self-sufficient look, would cover as it were the defects of his raiment and impress people with the idea that he was a person of consequence in spite of the seediness of his wardrobe. He did not however *appear* the bully without being fully prepared on all occasions to justify the character—unless indeed it were that he was no coward, as the generality of bullies notoriously are. In early life he had served in the army, as a subaltern officer, with some credit to himself so far as a desperate and reckless valour was concerned: but his unprincipled conduct as a gamester and spendthrift, had led him into certain transactions so closely bordering upon downright swindling, that he was compelled to leave his regiment. He sold his commission as a lieutenant—became a "man about town"—retained a semi-military style of apparel—dubbed himself "Captain"—and lived upon his wits. By frequenting taverns, billiard-rooms, and night-houses, at the

West End of the town, he scraped acquaintance not only with inexperienced young gentlemen just entering upon life, and whom he was sure to fleece most unmercifully,—but also with many dissipated noblemen who visited those places of resort, and whom the Captain invariably claimed as acquaintances in future. If they were bold enough to give him the "cut direct," he was certain to pick a quarrel with them; and if they even gave him "the cold shoulder," he would find some means of annoying them. They therefore preferred the less disagreeable alternative of bestowing upon him a familiar nod when they encountered him in public; and thus the Captain was enabled to boast of his numerous aristocratic acquaintances.

But the thousand and one devices which he put into practice in order to levy contributions upon his friends, were ingenious and humourous to a degree: and with a view to prevent the possibility of refusal when he thus made his pecuniary demands, he was wont to request a sum so moderate—often-times so ridiculously small—that it was next to impossible for the individual whom he thus pounced upon to parry the attempted exaction with any feasible excuse. By the aid, therefore, of half-a-crown from one, eighteen-pence from another, and a shilling from a third, the Captain contrived to live from hand to mouth and to rub on from day to day—although there were occasional intervals when he was very "hard up" indeed and when he was literally driven to his wits' end.

Such was Captain Rolando Tash—a gentleman whose name was notorious at every tavern, brothel, gaming-table, spunging-house, livery-stable, and place of public resort, in or near London. The King's Bench and Fleet prisons likewise resounded with his fame; and every magistrate in the metropolis had more than once been compelled to fine the Captain for being drunk and disorderly in the street; or to bind him over to keep the peace towards some individual in particular and all his Majesty's subjects in general. In fact, there was not a prominent knocker at the West End which had not been wrenched either partially or wholly off by the Captain's hand at some time or another: there was not a surgeon's bell which had not been violently and alarmingly rung on more occasions than one by this same hilarious Captain, when in his cups;—there was not a barber's pole which he had not shifted from its proper place to some neighbouring establishment which did not require any such emblem at all;—and there was scarcely a street-watchman's head which had not been broken at least once by this same unruly and incorrigible Captain Rolando Tash.

Such was the gentleman who emerged from a tavern in the Knightsbridge Road just at the very moment when the Earl of Curzon issued forth from Acacia Cottage. But the Captain was not alone: indeed, he never was alone. That is to say, he invariably had an attendant following him at a respectful distance,—a sort of Man Friday or Sancho Panza, who shared his fortunes and his misfortunes—his successes and his reverses—and who adhered to him with the staunchest fidelity. In fact, whoever beheld Captain Tash advancing with his usual swagger along the street, might be certain that his man Robin was not very far behind. There was however a great discrepancy between the pretensions, demeanour, and personal appearance of the two worthies: for inasmuch as the Captain invariably looked and walked as if he fancied the street was not half wide enough for him and that everybody ought to make room and touch their hats as he passed, Robin on the contrary was wont to glide along the kerb-stone or creep by the side of the wall with the stealthy pace of a cat. Moreover, Robin was thin, lank, and lean in person—shuffling and shambling in gait—downcast, furtive, and sneaking in looks—retiring and apparently timid in manner. Thus, great as the contrast was between the burly person of the master and the starveling appearance of the man, it was not greater than the difference between the insolent assurance of the former and the unobtrusive air of meekness which characterised the latter.

Robin was not however exactly what he seemed in this respect. Beneath that bashful and timid air, lurked a cunning watchfulness that was ever on the alert to take advantage of any circumstance that might be turned to good account. Keen, shrewd, and penetrating, Robin was always most upon his guard when he appeared most retiring: and when his looks seemed to express naught save a listless vacancy, he was sure to be intent on some object requiring skill, tact, and caution to carry it out. More thoroughly unprincipled than even his master—if that were possible—or at all events, capable of the prompt performance of deeds at the first aspect of which the Captain would pause and deliberate,—Robin was as dangerous as the creeping snake, whereas his employer was like the bull that bellows and makes every one aware of its presence before it has time to do a mischief.

The man Robin was pretty nigh the same age as his master, in whose service he had been for about a dozen years at the period when we thus introduce them to our readers. To the Captain he was devotedly attached; and although circumstances had placed them rather on the footing of companions and friends, than of employer and servant, yet Robin invariably treated Tash with the utmost deference and respect. In fact, the tie which bound the sneaking, hypocritical, unprincipled Robin to the overbearing, insolent, and arrogant bully, was one of those mysterious phases in the human character which can only be accounted for by the belief that even the worst and vilest of our species must have somebody or something to love and care for.

Not that the Captain was unkind to his man: on the contrary, he treated him with as much consideration as it was in his nature to bestow—and for any one to offend Robin, was to provoke the certain displeasure of his master. On the other hand, Robin would have died rather than prove unfaithful to the Captain: and though he would have sold his own brother, if he had one, to the gibbet—or would have plucked an angel of his wings if the plumage were of any service to him,—yet was he incapable of injuring a hair of his master's head.

Such was the singular character of this man. His name was properly Robert Shanks; but he was always known as plain "Robin"—and so unaccustomed was he to be addressed by his surname, that it was a wonder he did not forget it altogether. His apparel consisted of a seedy suit of black; and as he wore a white cravat, his appearance was as much that of a decayed itinerant preacher as of a valet out-of-livery to a gentleman in straightened circumstances.

On issuing forth from Acacia Cottage, the Earl of Curzon looked up and down the road in search of a hackney coach to take him home or whithersoever he meant to proceed,—when he was suddenly accosted by Captain Tash.

"How are you, my lord?" exclaimed the individual, performing a military salute with his stick. "Your lordship looks annoyed——"

"Not at all," said the Earl, abruptly. "Good afternoon, Captain—I am in a hurry:"—and the nobleman hastened on in the direction towards the West End.

"Beg pardon, my lord," observed Captain Tash, instantaneously overtaking the Earl, whom he grasped by the arm: "but your lordship——"

"Well, what is it?" demanded the nobleman, impatiently. "I told you that I was in a hurry——"

"And I shan't detain you a moment," said the Captain: then lowering his voice to a whisper and assuming a most mysterious look, he observed, "There's a poor apple-woman round the corner yonder, who's stall has been thrown down by some mischievous young rascal—by gad! it's true, my lord!—and the poor old wretch is whimpering enough to break her own heart and make mine bleed with compassion. But as the devil would have it, I came out this morning in such a hurry—to breakfast with a certain noble friend, in fact—that I left my purse at home——"

"And so you want some silver—eh?" cried the Earl, with angry impatience—for he was in no humour to endure one of the Captain's stories on the present occasion.

"Just eighteen-pence—neither less nor more!" said Tash. "That sum will enable me to make the Italian image-boy quite happy."

"I thought it was a fruit-woman?" observed the nobleman, now scarcely able to repress a smile at the contradiction into which the gallant Captain had inadvertently fallen.

"To be sure!" exclaimed the latter, altogether unabashed: "it *is* a fruit-woman—a poor creature with a wooden leg——"

"By the way," interrupted the Earl, as a sudden thought struck him, "I think you can do me a service, Captain; and instead of eighteen-pence, I may perchance be enabled to put as many pounds into your pocket."

"Make use of me as you will, my lord," exclaimed Tash, his rubicund countenance brightening up to such a degree that it seemed as if it were on the point of blazing with spontaneous combustion.

"Step aside with me," said the Earl, drawing the Captain beyond the view of Venetia's windows: then stopping short, he asked, "Did you observe the house which I have just left?"

"To be sure—Acacia Cottage," replied Tash.

"But do you know who lives there?" demanded the Earl.

"I can't say that I am acquainted with her name, my lord," was the response: "but as I was drinking all yesterday at the tavern opposite, I saw a beautiful lady once or twice at the windows; and I was told she was the mistress of the Cottage. But I did not think of inquiring her name——"

"It is Venetia Trelawney" said the Earl. "And now, the service which I need at your hands may be explained in a few minutes. But where is Robin?"

"There!" answered the Captain, pointing with his stick towards a shop that was closed, still in the door-way of which his man was half-concealed, just as a person stands up to avoid a shower of rain—although on the present occasion the weather was gloriously fine.

"I think Robin is the very person to assist in carrying out my views," continued the Earl of Curzon.

"And those views?" said Captain Tash, inquiringly.

"Are to watch all the acts, movemen and proceedings of Miss Trelawney," returned the nobleman.

"It shall be done," exclaimed Tash. "If she only kills a fly upon her window-ledge, the deed shall be duly reported to your lordship."

"Well, you may be as minute as you will in espying all her actions and making notes of them," proceeded the Earl. "Watch every one who visits her house, and write down a description of them if you cannot glean who they are: observe when they call—how long they remain—and let Robin follow them to discover where they live. Then, let Venetia herself be followed every time she goes out——"

"Robin is the fellow for this part of the business," interrupted Captain Tash, as he glanced complacently across the road towards the spot where his faithful dependant was still squeezing himself into the angle of the door-way. "Your lordship may depend upon it that Miss Trelawney shall never budge an inch without having Robin gliding after her. By day and night—in her carriage or on foot—fine weather or foul—no matter what the circumstances are, the lady shall be watched as closely, as completely, and as unerringly as if she was under the supervision of the Bow Street runners."

"I perceive that you understand me," said the Earl, a smile of satisfaction appearing upon countenance. "In fact, the most trivial particulars relative to Miss Trelawney will prove of importance and value to me. There is a lady living with her, named Mrs. Arbuthnot: and she also must be watched. If you and Robin cannot manage all this between you," continued the Earl, "do not hesitate to enlist the services of some discreet and trusty individual——"

"Depend upon it, my lord," exclaimed Tash, "that I and Robin will prove adequate to the task. Why, Robin is ubiquitous:—he is here—there—and everwhere, all in the same moment. Nothing can escape his watchful eye: if any living being can see through a brick wall, he's the fellow. Another advantage is, that the landlord of the *Green Dragon*, opposite Acacia Cottage, is a friend of mine—I mean to say, a person that I know: and he will render me all possible assistance. Concealed up in one of his front rooms, I shall keep an incessant look out—while Robin does the same; and all Miss Trelawney's proceedings shall be as well known to your lordship, as if you lived in Acacia Cottage and saw with your own eyes everything that was going on."

"I shall rely upon you," said the Earl. "And now take these ten guineas on account," he added, placing the sum named in the Captain's hand.

"Your lordship's business is now my own, as completely as if my life depended upon the issue," observed Tash.

They then separated—the nobleman proceeding towards the West End, and the Captain returning to the public-house, into which he was immediately followed by his man Robin.

CHAPTER V.

BLIND MAN'S BUFF.

At the charming village of Richmond, which, as most of our readers are aware, is about nine miles to the westward of London, there stood a handsome house, in the occupation of a widow lady named Owen. She had resided there some time—kept her carriage—was visited by all the neighbouring families of distinction—and occasionally gave splendid entertainments, at which however the principal attractions were decidedly her own four lovely daughters.

The names of these young ladies were respectively Agatha, Emma, Julia, and Mary: the eldest was about twenty-two—the youngest sixteen;—and they were all in the same style of beauty. Their hazel eyes shone with an eloquent vivacity—their dark brown hair was usually worn in flowing ringlets—and their animated countenances breathed voluptuousness and soft desires. The tallest of them was not above the middle height of women: but their forms were all modelled to an admirable symmetry—the light shape and supple movements of each charming girl producing the mingled effect of brilliancy and grace. They usually dressed pretty nearly alike: and at Richmond they were denominated the Four Goddesses.

But lovely as they were, it did not appear that even the eldest, although two-and-twenty years of age, had received any eligible offer of marriage: and this most probably arose from the fact of its being whispered that the Princes of the Royal Family were very intimate at the house. Not that scandal had gone so far as to sully the fame of the young ladies by any positive or specific assertion: but still it was known that the Prince Regent and his brothers, the Dukes of York and Cumberland, *did* visit Mrs. Owen in a private manner;—and although the girls were envied, caressed, and petted by their fashionable acquaintances all the more on this account, young gentlemen were nevertheless rather shy of seeking their hands in marriage.

This circumstance did not however seem to trouble the minds or interfere with the happiness of Agatha, Emma, Julia, and Mary. They were light-hearted, joyous, good-tempered girls; and their pleasing manners, sprightly conversation, and elegant accomplishments rendered them universal favourites. They never wanted partners in the dance—the handsomest and gayest gallants eagerly pressing forward to ensure their hands for a quadrille, however backward these suitors might be in requesting those self-same hands in marriage.

Mrs. Owen was a lady who did the honours of her dinner-table or ball-room to the utmost perfection. She dressed with splendour, but with good taste: and now, in the glorious *embonpoint* of forty-five and with the remains of a beauty that must have been truly splendid in her earlier years, she was still a remarkably fine woman. She had been a widow, it was believed, for a long time: but what her husband was when alive, did not seem to be generally known.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—and the four young ladies were assembled in the drawing-room of their abode at Richmond. Mrs. Owen was in another apartment—or to tell the truth, in the housekeeper's room, superintending the arrangements for a very choice little supper that was to be given at ten precisely. Her daughters were all dressed with the most perfect elegance—although, in compliance with the fashion of the day, their white shoulders were left completely nude and their fair bosoms so much exposed that little remained for the imagination in order to fill up the picture of each glowing bust.

The time-piece upon the mantel in the drawing-room had struck eight, we say,—when a plain carriage and pair drove up to the house; and the Prince of Wales alighted, followed immediately by the Marquis of Leveson. They were at once ushered into the mansion—and the carriage was taken round to the stables.

But however privately and unostentatiously this royal visit was paid to the Owens, the arrival of the Prince Regent and his veteran companion was duly observed by an ill-looking man who stood concealed behind a clump of trees at a short distance.

This individual, whose age might have been somewhere betwixt thirty and forty, was short, thin, and excessively pale: and the ghastly aspect of his face was enhanced by the lank black hair that appeared below the slouching brims of a battered hat, and also by the dark eyes that shone like burning coals in the deep sallow hollows in which they were set. He wore a shabby shooting-jacket—corduroy breeches—leathern gaiters—and a heavy pair of lace-up boots. A cotton handkerchief was tied loosely round his neck;—his shirt was not particularly clean;—and altogether there was an air of such determined ruffianism and desperate villany about this individual, that no traveller, however brave, would relish meeting him in a lonely place.

From the clump of trees where he had concealed himself, he observed the arrival of the Prince Regent: but when he saw that his Royal Highness was accompanied by the Marquis of Leveson, he gave vent to a bitter imprecation expressive of annoyance. He however remained in ambush, with his keen eyes fixed upon a path-way leading round to the back door of Mrs. Owen's house.

In a few minutes a livery-servant came hurrying along from that direction with stealthy steps and looks cast furtively around, as if he were fearful of being observed: and, approaching the trees, he in a few moments joined the ruffian who was already concealed in ambush there.

"Well, Dan'el," said the livery-servant, "you see he's come?"

"Yes—but who the devil's that old buck along with him?" demanded the fellow, in a harsh voice the natural intonation of which was savage and even ferocious to a degree.

"It's only the Marquis of Leveson—one of the Prince's pals," replied the livery-servant.

"But you know, John," rejoined the ruffian, "that we haven't calculated upon there being *two* to deal with. We thought, from what you said, the Prince was sure to come alone ——"

"Well, Dan'el, and how the deuce could I foresee that his Royal Highness would bring the old Marquis?" interrupted the servant. "From what I gleaned from the young ladies' tiring-maid, the Prince only was expected: but as the Marquis is likewise intimate at the house, it isn't very astonishing that he should have borne his royal pal company. And, after all, won't it be a more lucrative affair?"

"Yes—but not so easy to manage, p'r'aps," observed the ruffian, in a musing tone.

"Why not? Haven't you got all the chaps in readiness?" asked John the domestic: "and are you afeard that an old buffer like Lord Leveson can make any effectual resistance?"

"No—not that," responded the man, whose Christian name appeared to be Daniel. "But the matter as it now stands looks more dangerous to venture upon. The Prince wouldn't peach, you know: he'd comply with every demand—and hold his tongue. Because, if he did kick up a row—make the thing public—and set the Bow Street runners at work, he would be forced to tell all the circumstances,—how he came down incog. to visit Mrs. Owen and the young ladies—and so forth: and this he would not do, out of consideration for the young ladies themselves. But with the Marquis it's quite different: because there 's nothing strange in a nobleman of his rank visiting a genteel family like the Owens—and therefore he might safely give information of all that happens, without fear of compromising the honour of the young ladies. Don't you see the force of these arguments?"

"I'll knock down all your reasoning in a moment, Hangman," said the livery-servant: "for, don't you see that according to your own showing the Prince will have every reason to hush the matter up for the sake of the ladies?—and therefore he'll put a seal upon the lips of Lord Leveson—because his lordship could not possibly give publicity to the affair without admitting that the Prince was in his company at the time. Do you see that, Dan'el the Hangman?" asked the servant, in a chuckling tone of coarse familiarity.

"Well, I must say that you've put the thing in the right point of view," observed the ruffian: "and therefore, as I'm a man who soon makes up his mind, I say without farther hesitation that the thing shall be done. I suppose they'll leave about midnight?"

"That's the hour the carriage is ordered for—and supper is to be served up at ten precisely," responded the footman. "So there's no doubt that the Prince and Leveson will be jogging soon after midnight?"

"Good!" returned the Hangman. "By the gibbet and halter! there'll be a rum game up before the sun rises again!"

"I hope so," said John the footman. "But I must hasten back now—for fear of being missed. Good night, Dan'el: I wish you luck, old fellow."

"There's no fear of that," rejoined the Hangman.

They then separated—the livery-servant retracing his steps stealthily towards the back entrance into the house, and the Hangman striking rapidly across the adjacent fields.

Meantime the Prince Regent and the Marquis of Leveson had joined the young ladies in the drawing-room of the mansion; and a sprightly conversation had speedily sprung up.

His Royal Highness was seated on a sofa between the eldest Miss Owen and Emma: while Julia and Mary became the more special objects of Lord Leveson's attentions. Mrs. Owen still remained absent from the room—and apparently her society was not much missed.

"I understand you have been very gay latterly, young ladies," said the Prince Regent, after a brief pause in the conversation. "Balls and dinner-parties at home—dances and soirees abroad—pic-nics in the park—water excursions——"

"Oh! everything charming, I can assure you!" exclaimed Miss Agatha, her pearly teeth revealed by the smile that parted her ripe, red, sensual lips. "But I can assure you, sir, that we missed you very much."

"You deceitful little puss," cried the Prince, throwing his arm round her neck and imprinting a kiss upon each warm and flushing cheek—and then another and another still upon her moist lips;—"I do not believe that you are sincere!"

"But I will guarantee Agatha's sincerity, by the experience of my own feelings," said Emma: then, as the Prince endeavoured to catch her likewise in his arms, she bounded from the sofa and darted away, making the room ring with her merry laugh.

The Prince hastened after her: and when she had led him a dance round the table, and from one end of the room to the other, she suffered herself to be driven up into a corner, where she was compelled to yield her lips, as ripe and as luscious as those of her elder sister, to the reiterated caresses of his Royal Highness.

"Oh! what fun a game of blind-man's buff would be!" ejaculated Miss Julia, starting from her seat, and thus escaping the toyings which the Marquis of Leveson was just beginning to bestow upon her.

"And let the Prince be blindfolded!" exclaimed Mary, now disengaging herself in her turn from the arm which the old nobleman threw around her bare neck: then running up to his Royal Highness, she took both his hands, crying with childish delight, "Will you play, sir?"

"To be sure I will!" said the Prince Regent, as he absolutely lifted the young lady up in his arms and covered her with kisses—despite of her fighting and struggling, which she however accompanied with the heartiest laughter: so that it was easy to perceive she was very far from being offended.

"Now—let me blindfold you, sir!" exclaimed Julia, approaching the Prince with a bandage, the instant her youngest sister had succeeded in escaping from his arms.

"With all my heart!" he cried. "But first——"

And catching her in his embrace, he culled the sweets of her lips as he had done with regard to her three sisters.

"Now are you satisfied?" she asked, as with glowing cheeks and smiling looks she disengaged herself from his arms: then, having hastily arranged her hair, she said, "Come, be gentle—and submit to be bandaged like a good boy."

"I will," returned the Prince, seating himself in a chair, while Miss Julia adjusted and fastened the bandage with her beautiful white hands, which the royal voluptuary kissed every time they touched his face.

"Now you may begin, sir!" she cried, darting away and clapping her hands gleefully: and the merry laugh of the four sisters rang like silver bells through the apartment.

"I have got a partial head-ache and cannot stand this amusement," said the Marquis of Leveson—but in the most perfect good-humour: and, quitting the room, he hastened to join Mrs. Owen, whom he ascertained, upon inquiry of a domestic, to be in the housekeeper's apartment.

It appeared that his lordship was a privileged person—and he was therefore received by Mrs. Owen

with a cordial, or indeed familiar welcome, although she was busily engaged in superintending the manufacture of whip-syllabubs and ice-creams.

Leaving the Marquis in company with the lady of the house, we must return to the drawing-room, where the utmost hilarity now prevailed. The Prince, entering into the spirit of the game as fully as if he were only a great school-boy in his teens, exerted himself to add to the merriment of these romping girls. To speak the truth, he was by no means anxious to catch any one of them and thereby divest himself of the office of Blind Man: he therefore allowed them to escape one after another, as often as they fell into his grasp. But before he thus released the captive damsel of the moment, he indemnified himself for his generosity towards the prisoner, by a fresh banquet upon the sweets of her lips.

The scene was really charming and exhilarating to a degree; and the Prince enjoyed it most unfeignedly. There he was, feeling his way about the drawing-room—careful not to overturn the table, upset a flower-stand, or smash a China vase,—while the romps bounded and frisked in all directions, leaping upon sofas and over chairs, and making the place ring with their musical voices and merry laughter. Now the Prince's extended hands came in contact with a muslin dress—then they glided over the polished surface of a glowing bosom: now they swept along a naked arm smooth as alabaster, but warm to the touch—then they were laid upon a shoulder smooth as velvet but plump in its natural softness: now his fingers became entangled for a moment in tresses of silken fineness—next his arms suddenly enfolded a waist of wasp-like symmetry—and then his lips were fastened upon flushing cheeks and a delicious mouth, while a bosom, palpitating with the excitement of the game and perhaps with other and more tender emotions, heaved and fell rapidly against his breast. But the fair one thus caught, would eventually succeed in escaping from the Prince's arms: and then

the game went on and on—each sister in her turn being captured, and then breaking loose to be presently made a captive once more.

At length his Royal Highness was compelled to abandon the sport through sheer exhaustion: and tearing off the bandage, he flung himself upon a sofa—laughing so heartily that it appeared as if his portly sides must burst. Then the young ladies, likewise perpetuating the merriment with their voices which sounded sweet as strings of musical pearls, threw themselves, one upon a sofa—another on an ottoman—a third on a chair—and the fourth on a footstool—to arrange their disordered dress and smooth their dishevelled hair. It seemed as if the inmates of a seraglio had been suddenly thrown into the most delightful confusion by the entrance of some stranger of the male sex, and as if each fair odalisque were in haste to conceal the charms which had been listlessly exposed in the fancied security that was thus so unexpectedly violated.

But was all that had just taken place a mere innocent romping on the part of these four sisters?—and was there a perfect guiltlessness of any immoral intent in the somewhat wild license to which the rein had been given? We are at present as much puzzled and bewildered on that score as our readers can possibly be; but we are bound to confess that if those lovely girls meant and thought no wrong, yet the ardour of the caresses and the nature of the toyings in which they had suffered the Prince to indulge, were sufficient to inflame all the nascent passions the fires of which assuredly beamed already in their eyes.

By the time the hair was re-arranged in luxuriant tresses and the disordered apparel restored to its previous state, the young ladies began to reflect that the supper-hour must be near at hand: and scarcely had they consulted the clock on the mantel-piece, when John the livery-servant entered to make the expected announcement. The Prince and his fair young friends accordingly proceeded to the apartment where the exquisite supper was served up, and where Mrs. Owen and the Marquis of Leveson were awaiting their presence.

The lady of the house and his Royal Highness met each other with the courteous familiarity of old friends; and it became evident here, as well as in the drawing-room up-stairs, that the Regent laid aside his princely rank altogether when on a visit to Mrs Owen and her bevy of charming daughters. But although he took his place at the board and behaved himself throughout the repast with that easy and polished familiarity which as a gentleman he was so well able to exercise, and which seemed in itself a tacit recognition of the perfect equality on which all were assembled for the time being,—he never once, by either a flippant word or a libertine act, made a breach in the propriety of conduct that prevailed during the banquet.

There was, however, plenty of laughing—plenty of mirth and good humour;—the champagne circulated pretty freely, adding brilliancy to the wit of the discourse and sparkling lustre to the eyes of the young ladies.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESPERADOES.

At midnight precisely the Prince Regent's carriage drove round from the stable-yard to the front of the mansion; and his Royal Highness immediately came forth and entered the vehicle. The Marquis of Leveson followed: the steps were put up—the door was closed—the footman ascended to his place on the box by the side of the coachman—and the equipage rolled rapidly away towards Kew.

The night was dark and the heavens were somewhat menacing: but there was a strong breeze which kept off the rain—and the brilliant lamps of the carriage lighted the road that it was pursuing. The pair of horses sped along at a gallant pace;—and inside the vehicle the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson chatted gaily concerning the entertainment experienced at the mansion which they had just quitted. From this topic their discourse insensibly turned upon the love-campaign which had been settled a few days previously with regard to Venetia Trelawney;—and the Prince Regent was observing that he should like to know how the Earl of Curzon had got on in that respect during the day which was just passed,—when both he and Lord Leveson were alarmed by a sudden noise, like the rush of several men from the hedges skirting the road.

"Perdition!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, as he let down the glass on his side, while the Marquis did the same on the other.

But before either of them had time to look out and ascertain what was the matter, the carriage came to a full stop—and the horses began to plunge violently. A commanding voice exclaimed, "Cut the traces!"—and at the same moment a scuffle was heard upon the box, while a masked countenance appeared at each of the windows.

"Villains! do you know who I am?" cried the Prince, furious with rage.

"Silence!—or I'll send a bullet through your head!" exclaimed the individual at the window next to his Royal Highness; and at the same time a pistol was protruded into the carriage.

"But I am the Prince Regent!" said George, thinking that this announcement would have the effect of overawing the ruffians.

"We know it," observed the man who had already spoken. "Silence—and no harm will happen!"

The Prince threw himself sullenly back in the carriage, not deigning to bestow another word upon persons whom he took to be highwaymen; while the Marquis of Leveson, who had also been regaled with the unmistakable view of a pistol-barrel on *his* side of the vehicle, thought it prudent not to venture upon any remark at all in the presence of such desperate characters.

All that had hitherto occurred, and which has taken us some minutes to relate, was really comprised in the space of comparatively a few seconds: and in the interval the traces were cut—the horses had ceased from plunging—the coachman and footman were overpowered by the ruffians who had scaled the box—and the whole equipage was therefore in the hands of the desperadoes, whoever they might be.

The conquest was therefore prompt and easy—the blow was struck with a suddenness and a resolution that defied resistance—and as the scene took place in the most lonely part of the road between Richmond and Kew, all clamour for help would have proved unavailing. Besides, the Prince's servants were unarmed, the bare possibility of such an outrage being undreamt of, and consequently unprovided for; and moreover, the desperadoes were eight in number.

It may be added, ere we pursue the thread of the

adventure, that the instant the party had burst forth from the hedges,—half emerging from one side of the road, and the remainder from the other,—two of them had seized the horses' heads—four had clambered up on the box to secure the coachman and valet,—and the other two had guarded the windows of the vehicle in the manner already described. There was consequently so much method in the whole proceeding, and the blow was struck with such promptitude and such a complete absence of anything bordering on hesitation or confusion, that all the details of the affair had been evidently pre-arranged. The men wore crape masks over their countenances: each one was well armed;—and the individual who had given the order to cut the traces, appeared to be the chief of the gang.

But to resume the details of the narrative. Immediately on the royal equipage thus falling into the power of the desperadoes, the coachman and valet, with their hands bound, were thrust inside the vehicle, the leader of the masked band entering it also.

"I beg your Royal Highness's pardon," said this individual, "for placing these menials in your company, and also for obtruding myself upon your presence. But certain little precautions are necessary: and these of which I have just spoken are amongst them. Another is to draw up the wooden blinds of the vehicle," he added, suiting the action to the word. "But pray don't let any of you entertain so foolish an idea as to offer resistance or think of overpowering me: because I hold the check-string in one hand—and a loaded pistol in the other. The string, if pulled, would instantaneously convey the alarm to my comrades, who are seated upon the box; and the pistol shall be discharged without hesitation or remorse if a hostile finger be laid upon me."

Thus spoke the leader of the band: and though there was a sort of free-and-easy familiarity in his tone and manner of delivery, it was rather the off-handed expression of confidence in his proceedings and certainty in his power to carry them out, than the jaunty insolence of a vulgar braggart. Indeed, there was a refined correctness in his language and a gentility in his pronunciation which showed that he had been well educated and that his position in life could not always have been an inferior or degrading one, whatever it was now.

By drawing up the blinds, he plunged the interior of the carriage into the most pitchy blackness: and he was therefore unable to observe the effect which his speech had produced upon the Regent and the Marquis. But as no reply was vouchsafed, and as each remained motionless in his seat, the desperado naturally concluded that his warnings and menaces had not failed to make the desired impression.

Meantime, his men were not inactive in the road. By the aid of some cord, the traces were repaired and the horses once more attached to the vehicle, the bright lamps of which were put out. Two of the fellows mounted the box—one of them undertaking the functions of coachman;—and the equipage drove rapidly on.

But what became of the other five desperadoes? They had horses concealed in a thicket close at hand: and mounting their steeds, they followed the carriage at a short distance. That they should not however attract the special notice and arouse the suspicions of any other travellers whom they might happen to meet, they parted company to a certain extent, by falling into the rear of one another and then riding along singly, but with short intervals between them. But in a few minutes the whole procession turned into a bye-road, where there was less necessity to adopt so much precaution.

By a sudden turn to the right which the carriage thus took, instead of proceeding straight forward as it ought to have done if it had continued in the direction of Kew, the captives inside were enabled to judge that they had diverged from the main road.

"Will you explain the object of this outrage, and the extent to which it is likely to reach?" demanded the Prince, now thinking it high time to make some inquiries of the sort, and indeed feeling himself unable to subdue any longer the alarms which were rapidly gaining upon him.

"Your Royal Highness need apprehend no personal ill-treatment," replied the leader of the gang: "but beyond this assurance I can say nothing more at present."

The Prince was about to give utterance to some threat: but remembering how powerless he was at the moment, and reflecting that the band probably consisted of the most desperate ruffians, who would as soon slit the wind-pipe of a Regent as of the humblest individual, he smothered his rage and resentment so far as to hold his peace.

A solemn silence accordingly prevailed inside the carriage, which continued to roll on at a rapid pace: but as to the direction it was now taking, this was a point that utterly baffled all conjecture. At the expiration of about half-an-hour it stopped: then followed a noise, as of massive gates unfolding upon their creaking hinges;—and the vehicle moved again, but only to turn into some place which, by the echoes raised, appeared to be the entrance to the paved court or stable yard of a mansion. The instant the carriage had thus reached its destination, attended by all the mounted desperadoes, the huge gates were closed again.

The door of the vehicle was now opened—and while the leader of the band retained his seat inside, he bade the prisoners descend. The Prince went first—the Marquis stepped out next—the coachman and valet followed—and then the masked chieftain of the desperadoes brought up the rear. The place was involved in pitchy darkness, unrelieved by even the faintest glimmer: but a door was almost immediately thrown open within a couple of yards of the spot where the party had alighted—and a lantern standing upon the floor just inside the threshold, revealed the interior of an apartment wrapped in funereal gloom.

An ejaculation of alarm fell from the lips of the Prince Regent; and a cry of dismay burst from the tongue of the Marquis of Le[illegible]on—while the two domestics were themselves not less terrified than their royal master and his noble friend. But the commanding voice of the chief bade them proceed: and the peremptory sternness of his tone producing a sort of galvanic effect, the prisoners at once passed into the room the appearance of which was indeed sufficiently sombre to strike terror to their souls. For it was completely hung around with black drapery—and the floor was covered with the same sable cloth. If there were any windows, they were not visible—the dark surface of the funereal hangings being uniform on all the four walls and unbroken by any casement, fire-place, or mantel. Indeed, the instant the Prince, the Marquis, the two servants, and the leader of the gang had entered this place, the very door itself which had admitted them disappeared. That is to

say, upon being shut, a curtain of sable drapery fell upon it: and thus, let the eyes turn whichever way they would, they were met by a wall of unvaried funeral blackness. The ceiling alone was white!

The haughty character of the Prince, which had already been so far shaken as to give vent to an ejaculation of alarm when his looks were first plunged into this chamber of funereal gloom,—that haughty character, we say, now well nigh lost all its firmness and its dignity, when he found himself thus entombed as it were in that sable sepulchre. The dim light of the lantern was but just sufficient to make the darkness visible, and to show that the furniture of the place consisted of only a table and half-a-dozen chairs, all covered with black cloth.

The Marquis of Leveson was even more troubled than the Prince Regent by the awe-inspiring aspect of this place, and the dark though vague and undefined terrors which it was so well calculated to conjure up. As for the royal coachman and valet—*they* were desperately alarmed likewise; for the object of the present proceeding appeared to defy all conjecture. If the desperadoes were mere highwaymen, they would have done their business at once in the middle of the road where they first stopped the carriage. But, if not robbers, who were they?—and what could they be? Whither had they brought their prisoners?—and what meant this apartment hung in black and looking like the abode of Death itself?

These queries not only suggested themselves to the two servants, but also to their royal master and his noble friend Leveson: but as we just now observed, they defied all possibility of solution by the mere means of unaided conjecture.

The eyes of the four prisoners therefore settled with looks of anxious inquiry upon the desperado-leader, who had accompanied them into the room, and who was gazing upon them from behind the crape mask which he still retained over his countenance. He was a tall man—somewhat stoutly built—and dressed in a plain suit of black. He wore a travelling cap, which was pulled so far down over his head as entirely to conceal his hair: and as his features were likewise covered, it was impossible to form the faintest idea of his age. The appearance of his figure—his gait—his attitudes—and his gestures, all however seemed to confirm the impression previously made by the grammatical precision of his language and the inflections of his voice—namely, that he was a man who must have at one time occupied a good position in life, however deeply crime or misfortune (or perhaps both) had since degraded him from that standard.

"Now, sir," said the Prince of Wales, "are we to be informed of the object of this outrage which you have practised upon us?"

"Harsh words will not amend matters," observed the chief; "and you may as well speak civilly to one who holds you as utterly and as completely in his power as if he were a gaoler and this house a prison. But your Royal Highness will presently accompany me to another room—while the Marquis of Leveson and these two domestics remain here to await your return."

"And what guarantee have I that no mischief is intended me?" demanded the Prince, not relishing the prospect of being separated from his friend and his servants.

"The same guarantee which prevents me from blowing out your brains at this moment, if I felt so disposed," replied the leader coolly; and as he spoke, he produced a pistol from each pocket. "But if I meant to take your Royal Highness's life," he added, returning the weapons to their places of concealment about his person, "I could have done it easily and conveniently enough in the high road, without the trouble of bringing you hither in the first instance."

"True!" murmured the Prince in a musing tone: then summoning all his courage and all his dignity to his aid, he said, "I am ready to accompany you."

"In a moment, sir," replied the leader: and turning towards the Marquis of Leveson, he said, "My lord, you will be so kind as to sit tranquilly here until my return. These servants will do the same. If any of you attempt to discover the doors leading hence, it will only be inviting the summary vengeance of those who are keeping guard upon this place, and who are not the less vigilant because unseen by you."

Having thus spoken, the mysterious individual took up the lantern, and drew aside a portion of the drapery at the end of the room.

"Proceed, sir," he said to the Prince, who immediately obeyed: and the masked desperado followed, closing the drapery again behind him.

Lord Leveson and the two servants accordingly remained in the black chamber, which was now plunged into a darkness as deep as the sable hangings that surrounded its walls.

For a few moments the sounds of retreating footsteps—but faint and light, as if treading upon a carpet—met their ears: and then all was still. An Egyptian darkness and a stupendous silence entombed them!

In the meantime the Prince Regent, on issuing from the sable chamber, found himself at the foot of a wide staircase, which was also covered with black drapery. Yes—every feature of the place was clothed in this ominous gloom,—the steps, the balustrades, and the very walls! It was enough to make the flesh creep upon the bones and chill the marrow within them, to be thus surrounded by the unchanging livery of death!

"Come quickly, sir," said the masked leader, hastening up the stairs with the lantern, the dim light of which only made the gloom apparent without mitigating its awe-inspiring effect.

"What on earth is the meaning of all this?" demanded the Prince, unable to restrain another ebullition of mingled alarm and petulance. "Have you brought me hither to be present at a funeral?"

"It is useless to question *me*," was the laconic answer, but delivered with a stress upon the pronoun which instantaneously struck the Prince, and caused the idea to flash to his mind that he was about to be shown into the presence of the real instigator of the outrage whereof his masked guide was perhaps after all only one of the instruments.

While he was still pondering upon this thought, and revolving a thousand conjectures in his mind as to the author of the adventure and its motive, the Prince reached a spacious landing, the floor and walls of which were hung in the same ominous drapery as elsewhere.

"Pass behind this curtain," said the mysterious guide, drawing back a portion of the sable hangings.

The Prince did as he was directed—for he saw no use in remonstrating or resisting: and he was moreover anxious to reach the end of the adventure with

all possible despatch. He accordingly passed behind the drapery, and found himself in the recess of a door-way. His masked companion let the curtain fall again, he himself remaining outside on the landing.

"Now open the door—and enter boldly!" he exclaimed, in a voice of assurance and encouragement.

The Prince Regent unhesitatingly followed this recommendation: the door yielded to his touch—he flung it open—a blaze of light burst upon his vision—and he found himself in a splendid apartment, where a lady of ravishing beauty was reclining upon a sofa.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LADY IN THE GOSSAMER DRESS.

We must pause to describe this splendid creature, whose loveliness burst upon the Prince Regent with an effect that in a moment chased from his memory all the disagreeable portions of an adventure which had thus assumed at length so delightful a phase.

She appeared to be dressed in a kind of oriental costume,—if indeed that garment could be denominated a dress which was made of so gauzy a material as to be almost transparent,—indeed, so diaphanous that although in reality of the purest white, it took a roseate tint from the flesh that showed through. Down to the waist, at all events, this was the effect of a garment which, scarcely thicker than a veil, veiled not the charms of which it formed the only covering; for neither corset nor linen intervened betwixt the lady's glowing bust and that semi-transparent raiment of silken gossamer.

Through this singular dress, therefore, the outlines of all the upper part of her form could be distinguished and traced as easily as the eye of a concealed observer may feast upon the beauties of a nymph bathing in a crystal stream, though plunged to the neck in the pellucid water.

And how voluptuous were the contours that might be seen through the gauzy drapery,—how soft and yet how firm in their swelling fulness! No portrait by Vandyke or Rubens, in which woman's charms are delineated in such soft luxuriance and with so rich a tone of colour, ever glowed so sensuously upon the canvass as did this lady's fine proportions in their living, warm, and palpitating beauty:—no model which antique statuary has left behind, could exceed the admirable symmetry of the rounded arm!

Then her countenance—how ravishingly beautiful!—her features—how enchantingly lovely!—her looks—how melting, how dreamily soft, how wantonly overpowering!

A profusion of light brown tresses showered on the nude shoulders: and above her polished brow was a wreath of pearls. Her eyes were large and dark,—contrasting strongly with the colour of her hair;—and being full of passion's lustre, they heightened the animation of a countenance every feature of which was eloquent with fervid feelings. Indeed, the aquiline nose—the scarlet lips—the rounded chin,—all indicated an ardent mind and a glowing temperament: while the delicate and scarcely perceptible tinge of the pink which relieved the polished skin from the insipid whiteness of alabaster, would in a moment deepen into warm carnation blushes at the least incident that quickened the pulse and made the blood flow faster in the throbbing veins!

We said that her dress was of an oriental style. A rich veil depended from the pearl-wreath that she wore upon her hair: but that veil flowed behind her, and neither concealed the wanton, impassioned, amorous looks of the countenance, nor the meretricious display of the person. Around her waist a splendid shawl was loosely tied in the fashion of Eastern women: a string of pearls encircled the neck that arched so gracefully;—and rich bracelets defined the rounded shape of the matchless arms. From her waist to her feet the gossamer garment flowed over a pink satin petticoat, the very folds and plaits of which were but so many outward indications of the fine symmetry of those limbs which they concealed: and the small, narrow, shapely foot, imprisoned in an embroidered shoe, rested negligently upon a stool—thus adding to the air of soft and sensuous abandonment in which the lady's form half-reclined on the crimson velvet cushions of the sofa.

The room in which this splendid woman was thus revealed, like an enchanting vision, to the eyes of the Prince Regent, was handsomely furnished and brilliantly lighted. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—as if the loveliness of its occupant were alike a halo and a fragrance, stealing with intoxicating effect upon the senses. The flood of light which filled the apartment, borrowed a softly roseate hue from the crimson draperies that were drawn close over the windows—the paper on the walls, the cushions of the furniture, and the rich pattern of the carpet,—all being of a corresponding colour.

For some minutes his Royal Highness remained transfixed just within the threshold of the door that had ushered him to this scene of enchantment,—transfixed, we say, and gazing in a wonder that subsided not and with a rapture that cooled not, upon the divinity of the place. At first she either did not notice him, or affected not to do so—but sate, or rather half-reclined in a pensive mood: and thus the perfect abandonment of her attitude developed the charms and graces of her person to the fullest advantage. But at the expiration of a few minutes she turned her head slowly in the direction where the Prince stood;—and as her large dark eyes rested upon his countenance, she started not, nor seemed in any way surprised or alarmed—but a glow of tender delight and melting joy spread over her countenance, descended to her neck, and blushed through the transparent drapery that covered her bosom.

Nor was the look withdrawn: but it settled upon the Regent with a liquid lustre so full of amorous expression and oriental languor, that he felt its influence stealing and growing upon him like that of a delicious dream in which the sleeper is wafted amidst realms of beatific enjoyment. And that look which the lady thus fixed upon him was accompanied by a smile which seemed to welcome him to that abode of bliss,—a smile wherein was concentrated all the profusion of glowing sentiments, burning words, and eloquent avowals which constitute the language of passion,—a smile, too, that revealed teeth white as ivory and parted the scarlet lips which seemed the fitting portals for a balmy breath and a musical voice.

Suddenly remembering the whole train of circumstances which had preceded his introduction to the presence of this heavenly being, the Prince turned to inquire of his masked guide who the lady was and what the adventure signified: but he found that he

was alone with the beauteous occupant of the apartment, and that the door had been closed behind him. For an instant a vague and unknown terror seized upon him: the very mystery of the whole occurrence struck him as ominous and even more than strange —he dreaded some snare, some treachery—and he trembled with bewilderment and doubt. But as his eyes were again turned upon the lady, and as they rested—or rather, were rivetted upon that lovely countenance still glowing with a warm blush, and that form the luxuriant charms of which were displayed so unreservedly and yet without the positive indelicacy that shocks rather than intoxicates the senses,—moreover, as he now met a gaze that, instead of being softly wanton, was all vibrating with desire,—the magic of that beauty and the fire of those glances thrilled like an electric influence through every vein and pierced to his very heart's core.

"Adorable being, who art thou?" he cried, now obeying only the maddening impulse of his feelings: and he advanced towards her.

She rose from the sofa and made him a salutation so full of witching grace that it heightened his emotions to a positive delirium of pleasure: and now that he beheld her close, and saw that all the charms which had ravished him at a distance lost nothing of their glowing loveliness by this near contemplation, —when his eye swept over the flowing outlines and rounded contours of that form which, though not above the middle height, was sultana-like in its imposing as well as dazzling beauty,—he was so ravished, so enchanted, so overpowered, that he felt as if he were in the presence of a being that was something more than mortal.

Resuming her seat upon the sofa, she invited him with a winning gesture and a delicious smile to place himself by her side: then fixing her magnificent eyes upon him, she said in a voice that was soft, timid, and tremulous in its soul-enchanting melody, "Your Royal Highness has asked me who I am: but this is a secret which I dare not reveal?"

"That so divine a creature cannot possibly be connected with a gang of veritable desperadoes, I am well assured," returned the Prince: "and therefore I am at a loss to conceive who or what the men could be that brought me hither."

"Pardon the outrage, sir," exclaimed the lady, in an imploring voice and with looks of the tenderest entreaty.

"I can pardon anything for your sake," was the response, as his Royal Highness fixed gloating looks upon his fair companion's person. "But wherefore was such a course adopted in order to introduce me to your presence?"

The lady threw a glance full of passion and fervid with desire upon the countenance of the enraptured Prince: then, casting down her eyes, while a deep blush suffused her cheeks and spread over her neck, she murmured in a low voice, "Because I love you!"

"O adorable woman!" he exclaimed, with an almost frenzied impetuosity, as he flung his arms around her and strained that warm, glowing, palpitating form to his breast with passionate ardour.

And, as if taken with complete surprise by the suddenness of the action on his part, she offered no instantaneous resistance, but abandoned herself as it were for a few moments to the embrace in which she was thus enfolded and to the burning kisses which he Regent imprinted upon her lips and cheeks: then apparently recovering all her self-possession—and starting as if a sudden thought flashed through her brain to enlighten her upon the danger of her position—she disengaged herself from his arms and sank palpitating with excitement upon the farther extremity of the sofa.

But that contact with the beauteous creature,—the sensation which seemed as if the impress of her person remained upon his arms as the image of her loveliness was stamped upon his soul,—excited the passions of the Prince to a frenzied point: and he sate gaking upon her with devouring looks—longing to rush forward and snatch her to his breast once more—but fearing to offend by too great a precipitation.

"You said that you loved me?" he observed at length.

"And I spoke truly, great Prince!" she replied, now seeming partially to recover herself: but still the rapid swelling and sinking of her bosom was visible through the gossamer drapery. "Listen to me for a short time:—and then—and then——"

"You will be mine?—all mine?" exclaimed the Prince, with the hurried tone and impatient look of a fervid suspense, in which rapturous hope nevertheless predominated.

"Yes—all thine," was the response given murmuringly, and with downcast eyes and glowing cheeks.

"Then speak, lady—speak!" cried the Prince: "but for heaven's sake let not the preface to my perfect bliss be unnecessarily prolonged!"

"I said that I loved your Royal Highness," resumed the lady, in a voice which although low as the murmuring of a silver stream, was tremulously clear as the flow of that rivulet in its pebbly bed;—"and I said truly! Descended from an English father and a Persian mother, my intelligence, my habits, and my language are those of your cold northern clime: but my soul burns with the impassioned and enthusiastic fervour that animates the breasts of those who are born in the far-off orient."

"Charming and mysterious creature!" exclaimed the Prince, gazing on her with an increasing rapture.

"The love that I bear for you," she continued, in that same melting tone which was full of a plaintive harmony, indescribably sweet and profoundly touching, "was engendered in my bosom by the fame of your admirable qualities. I heard that your manners were polished to a degree of refinement seldom attained by the most finished gentlemen,—that your mind was well stored with all valuable knowledge,—that your conversation was fraught with irresistible attractions,—and that you were capable of displaying a winning tenderness, the power of which no woman could feel with impunity. In a word, while sojourning in the east, such rumours and reports reached me concerning you, that I sent to England to procure your portrait: and—of that portrait I became enamoured!" she added, with a bashful hesitation which rendered her voice still more touchingly tremulous and called up a fresh blush to her damask cheeks.

"Oh! if this be all true," exclaimed the Prince, "the adventure is imbued with a tinge of romance which renders it indescribably enchanting!"

"True!" she ejaculated, raising her superb eyes and bending them reproachfully upon him: "Oh! can you suppose that I am capable of deceiving you? Have I journeyed from the east which I love so well, to this cold clime of yours, merely to be received with distrust and experience a chilling sus

picion? Alas! better were it for me to have remained afar off, cherishing this passion of mine as a delicious dream—a joyous delusion—than to have travelled hither to face the stern reality of disappointment!"

"No—do not speak thus, adorable being!" cried the Prince, approaching her with extended arms.

"Not yet—not yet!" she exclaimed, with a sudden access of impetuous excitement: and waving him back, she looked him full in the countenance, as if to read all that was passing in the deepest recesses of his soul. "Do you believe me now?" she demanded, in a tone which appeared to imply that all her happiness was staked upon the answer.

"I do—I do!" exclaimed the Regent, each moment plunging more profoundly into the bliss of an ecstatic infatuation: for every word, every look, every motion on the part of the romantic fair one, only tended to provoke fresh desires and madden his passions beyond all possibility of control.

"Oh! accept my fondest thanks—my sincerest, deepest, most fervid gratitude, for that avowal!" she cried, in the exultation of mingled rapture and triumph: then throwing herself back, she closed her eyes gently, as if to concentrate all her powers of vision, both outward and mental, in the contemplation of the assurance which she had just received and which she treasured up in the recesses of her soul.

The Prince's head was lost as it were amidst all the influences which were brought to bear upon his senses: for this attitude to which the lady had just abandoned herself formed another light in which to view a ravishing picture, and in which new graces and new charms were developed. And as the lady's fervid soul appeared to breathe through her entire person, the impression which each movement on her part made upon the mind, was that all the flexions of her body were the indices of her passions.

Drawing himself towards her in a sidelong manner, the Prince passed his arm gently round her waist—and for a few moments she seemed unconscious of the circumstance. But as he pressed her more sensibly and became bolder in his toyings, she suddenly started—gazed upon him for an instant with a half-wondering, half-affrighted look—and then burst into tears.

Astonished and pained by this abrupt and most unaccountable ebullition of grief, he strained her more closely in his arms—kissed away her tears—and became so moved by her sorrow and so maddened by the contact of her form, that he would have made any sacrifice in order to recall the smiles to her countenance and win from her the favours which she had more than half promised to bestow.

"What grieves you, dearest one?" he murmured soothingly.

"I was suddenly reminded of a circumstance which cuts me to the quick," she answered, in a broken voice and with convulsive sobs.

"But name it—explain yourself," said the Regent. "Is there aught which I can do——"

"Yes—everything!" she replied, accompanying the words with the tenderest caresses.

"Tell me—keep me not in suspense——"

"A person who has merited your displeasure, and who is related to me by the bonds of near kinship——"

"I will forgive him," said the Prince. "Is that all?"

"Oh! it is more than he could hope!" she murmured, pressing closer to her royal companion and redoubling the ardour of her caresses. "But you must sign his pardon——"

"I will sign anything—everything," gasped the infatuated Prince, breathless with maddening passion: "so long as I may seal the same upon your lips."

"Confirm this act of clemency with your autograph," whispered the lady, in her most seductive tones,—"and I am thine! 'Twill be but the work of a moment—there are writing materials upon the table——"

And with her arms still wound about the Prince's neck, and her form half clinging to him—half nestling in his embrace,—she made him rise from the sofa, and drew him gently towards the table. 'Twas, as she had said, the work of but a few moments: and during this brief interval she so played upon his senses by the most thrilling, impassioned, fervid caresses, and by permitting those toyings for which her light apparel allowed such scope, that the Prince reeled as if under the influence of intoxication—and his senses were steeped in that elysian ebriety.

Close by the table there was an ottoman, upon which the royal voluptuary and his companion seated themselves—and on the table there was a paper with something written upon it. The Prince endeavoured to read the lines traced thereon: but the glowing arms drew his head down till it reached a still more palpitating breast—and then, in one of those moments in which a man's senses are so enthralled by woman's magic influence that he would sell his soul to Satan rather than abandon the crowning bliss,—in such a moment was it that his Royal Highness seized the pen and affixed his name to the document.

Then, breathless with the prolonged excitement, he once more strained the lady in his arms: and she murmured with billing tenderness, "I am thine! I am thine!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SEQUEL OF THE NIGHT'S ADVENTURE.

LET us now return to the sable chamber in which Lord Leveson and the Prince Regent's two servants had been left in total darkness.

Their position was far from being agreeable: but they did not see any way in which they could possibly help themselves. The solemn warning given by the leader of the band ere he quitted the room, still continued to ring in their ears long after the sounds of the retreating footsteps had ceased; and although they did not relish the thought of thus being left in the darkness of a strange place, where a myriad unknown dangers might surround them, they dared not move from the seats which they had taken nor yet give utterance to even a whispered syllable.

In silence and darkness, therefore, did upwards of twenty minutes elapse: and at the expiration of this period returning footsteps were heard, descending the great staircase—and the chief, bearing the lantern in his hand, appeared from behind the sable drapery.

But at the same instant that the light thus gleamed in its dimness again,—shadowing forth the gloom of the apartment, and playing with ghastly reflection upon the countenances of the nobleman and the servants,—these three prisoners became aware that there

was another masked individual present in the chamber, besides the leader who had just re-entered. Motionless and statue-like stood that *other*, close by the spot where the sable curtain covered the door which had admitted them into the room: there he stood—a mysterious sentinel as he was—with the black mask upon his countenance and a pistol in each hand!

But how noiselessly he must have entered!—unless indeed, he had all along been in the room—having perhaps followed the party in at the outset, and having remained concealed behind the drapery which was let down over the door, until the departure of the chief with the lantern was the signal for him to glide noiselessly forth and guard the movements as well as listen to the discourse of the Marquis and the servants. But as they had neither budged an inch nor spoken a word, the precautions taken proved to be unnecessary. Nevertheless, the presence of the sentinel there convinced the nobleman and the domestics that the warning which they had received was no idle threat, and that they had acted prudently in yielding obedience to its terms.

The Marquis and the royal servants were both surprised and alarmed when they saw the masked individual with the lantern return unaccompanied by the Prince Regent: and the old nobleman, plucking up a spirit, said, "Where is his Royal Highness? Remember that he is the son of your Sovereign ——"

"For which circumstance I care not a solitary fig," observed the chief. "But you may make your mind easy, my lord: the Prince is in excellent company, and no doubt as happy as possible," he added, with a slight accent of sarcasm in his tone.

"When will he return to us?" inquired the Marquis: "and when, also, shall we be emancipated from this incomprehensible thraldom?"

"See what o'clock it is by your watch, my lord," said the chief, approaching with the lantern.

"Ten minutes to two," observed the Marquis of Leveson, as he drew forth a superb watch set with brilliants, and the value of which was at least a hundred guineas.

"I will thank you for that bauble," said the leader, in a cool off-hand fashion.

"What!" ejaculated the nobleman, springing from his seat: "are you highwaymen after all? I had entertained a more lofty opinion of you ——"

"Then what did you take us for?" demanded the leader. "Knights-errant of modern times?"

"I could not, nor can I, conjecture the object which you had in view in bringing us hither," said the Marquis: "but when I found that you did not rob us upon the spot where you assailed us in the first instance, I naturally concluded that you had some aim beyond plunder!"

"And so we have," replied the chief. "But we mix up two or three agreeable things together and thus blend our avocations: don't we, Daniel?"

"To be sure we do," was the laconic answer given by the sentinel stationed near the door.

"And therefore, my lord," continued the chief, "I will trouble you for that watch—and those diamond rings on your fingers—and likewise your purse, while you are about it."

The Marquis of Leveson yielded with a good grace to these demands; for, considering his enormous wealth, the loss of the jewels and the money was not a matter calculated to break his heart—and, besides, he saw now completely he was in the power of the depredator.

"Oh! fie, my lord!" exclaimed this individual, as he turned out the contents of the purse in the palm of his hand. "A nobleman of your rank and property to have only a poor, paltry fifty-three guineas about your person. Really it is incredible. But perhaps you have a pocket-book?"

"Here it is," said the Marquis, producing it with evident reluctance. "There may be a Bank-note or two—to which you are most welcome: but if there should happen to be any private papers——"

"Which there are, no doubt," observed the masked leader: then, as he took the pocket-book, he said, "How much will your lordship give to have this returned to you just as it is, and unopened?"

"Give it me back at once," cried the Marquis, eagerly clutching at the offer of a compromise, "and I will pay a thousand guineas to-morrow to whomsoever you may appoint to receive the same."

"Ah! then the pocket-book is worth at least a thousand guineas, according to your own admission," said the desperado, with a quiet chuckle at the tact whereby he had succeeded in eliciting the offer. "Well, my lord, you will just double that sum——"

"Double it!" exclaimed the Marquis. "What? two thousand guineas for the pocket-book? Well—give it me at once—and—and—I'll agree."

"Two thousand guineas is the ransom-money, then? But your lordship must not think that I can part with the security before I finger the cash."

"I pledge you my word as a nobleman and a gentleman that the amount shall be forthcoming——"

"And a Bow Street constable likewise, for the person who calls to receive it—eh?" observed the masked leader. "No, no, my lord—I don't do things after this fashion. Daniel," he said, turning towards the sentinel, "procure a sheet of paper and some sealing-wax."

The man disappeared behind the drapery—and during his absence a solemn silence prevailed in the room. The Marquis paced backward and forward in deep and uneasy meditation—for he was cruelly annoyed at the idea of his pocket-book falling into strange and unscrupulous hands:—the two servants exchanged significant looks, as if mutually asking where, when, and how the mysterious adventure was to terminate;—and the unknown leader examined the costly watch and the diamond rings with looks that flashed joyfully through the eyelet-holes of the mask.

In three minutes his man came back with the articles required; and the leader said, "Now, my lord, envelop the pocket-book in this paper—and seal it with your own signet."

"But you have got all my rings," exclaimed the Marquis.

"True! I will give back the one that has your crest engraved on the stone; and you can seal the packet therewith. If it be returned to you with that seal unbroken, you will be satisfied?"

"Assuredly," said the Marquis: and the pocket-book was enveloped and sealed accordingly—the leader of the band retaining the parcel, and the nobleman restoring the signet-ring to his own finger. "But now, when and by what means will the pocket-book be given back to me?—and how am I to pay the ransom money?"

"Remain at home all day long on Wednesday," was the reply; "and take care to have the two thousand guineas ready at hand—indeed, about your person—and leave the rest to me."

"All day long on Wednesday," said the Marquis

in a musing tone to himself: "that will do very well. Had it been Friday, I must have declined—positively declined, at any risk—*that* being my day for the charming Venetia Trelawney."

The conversation now dropped: and it seemed tolerably certain, to the supreme satisfaction of the coachman and valet, that *they* were not to be laid under contribution in respect to their watches and money. No doubt the masked chieftain fancied they did not possess anything of particular value: or else he scorned the idea of plundering domestic servants.

An hour elapsed—and at length a bell rang in the interior of the house.

"You will soon take your departure now," said the leader: and, having thus spoken, he disappeared once more with the lantern.

In about five minutes he returned, followed by the Prince—and ejaculations of joy fell from the lips of the Marquis and the two servants. Dim and feeble as was the light shed by the lantern, it was nevertheless sufficient to show that the countenance of his Royal Highness wore a smile of complacent satisfaction which he could not altogether subdue, though he evidently essayed to conceal it. But there was little leisure for the Marquis of Leveson or the royal domestics to indulge in conjectures as to what might have occurred to the Regent: for the man Daniel immediately raised the drapery covering the door—and the leader, having extinguished the lantern, guided the Prince, the Marquis, and the two servants back to the carriage, into which he himself followed them as before.

The blinds of the vehicle were again drawn up—the massive gates were opened—and the equipage rolled away, under the same circumstances as it arrived. That is to say, two of the desperadoes

were seated on the box, and five followed on horseback—the chief, as already mentioned, being inside to keep guard upon the prisoners.

At the expiration of about half an-hour, during which a profound silence was observed in the interior of the vehicle, the equipage stopped. The leader put down the blinds—opened the door—and sprang forth. The moon was now riding high in the heavens; and it immediately became apparent to the royal party, as they glanced forth from the windows, that the carriage had brought them back to the very spot where the desperadoes had stopped it upwards of three hours before.

The two men had already leapt from the box—and the servants, being now permitted to issue from the interior, resumed their places outside.

"Good night—or rather, good morning," said the leader of the masked band.

"Good morning," returned Lord Leveson, who thought it prudent to be civil until fairly out of the hands of the formidable troop: and the next moment the carriage rolled rapidly away.

The Prince and the Marquis now began to exchange those explanations which they mutually longed to receive. The nobleman's story was short enough—but it nevertheless caused the Regent the utmost amazement, inasmuch as he had hitherto felt convinced that plunder formed no part of the disguised desperadoes' aims. The discovery of the fact that the very contrary was the case, for a moment damped the pleasurable feelings which his strange and exciting love-adventure had left behind: and he began to think that he had been made the dupe of some unprincipled adventuress, instead of having been the object of a disinterested affection on the part of a lady who had travelled all the way from the east to enjoy his company and who had been compelled to have recourse to extraordinary measures to procure the gratification of her passion.

However, he related his adventure to the Marquis, who listened with the profoundest attention and the liveliest interest—especially to those portions of the narrative in which the Prince delineated the charms, fascinations, and seductive powers of the beauteous lady.

"And upon what understanding did you separate?" inquired the Marquis.

"The time slipped away with marvellous rapidity, while we lay clasped in each other's arms," responded his Royal Highness: "and my thoughts —my senses—all my faculties, were so absorbed in the intoxicating bliss which I thus experienced, that I forgot to question her minutely upon those matters concerning which it was most necessary for me to be enlightened. But I presume that even if I had put such inquiries, she would have evaded all satisfactory answers—and thus, in any case, was I no doubt doomed to depart in ignorance of who she is, what is her name, where she lives, and why she adopted such extraordinary precautions to shroud herself in an impenetrable secrecy. Ah! let her be what she may, Leveson, she is not the less an adorable creature—and I would give the world to obtain her altogether as a mistress!"

"But under what circumstances did you part?" inquired the nobleman.

"The time-piece upon the mantel proclaimed the hour of three," said the Prince: "and then she started from my arms, declaring that we must separate immediately. I implored her to allow me to remain a little longer—but she was peremptory. Then I besought her to promise that we should meet again—and she cheerfully acquiesced, reserving to herself the privilege of making the appointment. She vowed that she would write to me in the course of a few days: then, having rung a bell, she embraced me with impassioned fervour and hurried me away. Outside the door I found the man with the lantern—and he escorted me back to the room where you were waiting."

"And the deed which you signed, sir?" remarked Lord Leveson, interrogatively.

"Ah! that circumstance begins to vex me," exclaimed the Prince: "but I did it in a moment of such infatuation, that if it were the assignment of my soul to the Evil One, I should not have hesitated. Whatever the document might have been, its nature must transpire sooner or later—and it will no doubt furnish a clue to the correct reading of the entire mystery. But for the life of me I cannot fix upon any one who, having offended me, would be anxious to receive my written pardon ——"

"Is it not probable that your Royal Highness has signed that pardon, not in any private capacity, but in your executive position as Regent of the Kingdom?" observed the Marquis of Leveson, in a serious tone.

"It may be so," observed the Prince, with the impatience of vexation: "and if your surmise is correct, I have done a very foolish thing—that is all! But it is useless to deplore what cannot be recalled," added his Royal Highness, after a brief pause, and in that devil-me-care spirit which he so frequently summoned to his aid in the same way as a desperate man has recourse to alcoholic liquors to drown care.

"And does your Royal Highness wish to fathom the whole affair to the bottom without delay," asked Leveson,—"or to wait and see whether the lady will perform her promise of writing to you?"

"Can you suggest any means of unravelling the skein of the mystery?" demanded the Prince. "But remember that we dare not adopt any course calculated to give publicity to the adventure: otherwise we should be laughed at by our friends and reviled by our enemies."

"I am aware of the necessity of throwing a veil over all such occurrences in which the honour or character of your Royal Highness may in any way be mixed up," said Leveson: "but still I think that a private and secret investigation might be set afoot ——"

"How?—by what means?" asked the Prince impatiently. "I repeat that whether this woman be an adventuress or not—a well-meaning lady or the associate of brigands—I care not. I am enamoured of her, Leveson — deeply, desperately enamoured of her—and I would adopt any measure that is likely to trace her out, provided that all chance of exposure be avoided."

"I view the thing precisely in the same light," returned the Marquis. "Some time on Wednesday I shall be called upon to pay the two thousand guineas ransom-money: and I thought of employing an active, intelligent, crafty Bow Street officer to follow the person who may come for the money ——"

"Excellent! Nothing could be better!" exclaimed the Prince. "But mind that in whatever account you choose to give the officer, you keep my name out of the question."

"As a matter of course," replied the Marquis.

"And also that if you discover a clue to the reading of the mystery," added the Prince, "you will not avail yourself of it to obtain the lady as your own mistress."

"I pledge you my honour, sir, on that point," rejoined the nobleman. "But since you are so enamoured of this syren in the gossamer dress, your Royal Highness will have no heart left to bestow upon the beauteous Venetia Trelawney."

"I really don't think I shall," said the Regent: "and if it weren't that we have made a compact and that there are six thousand guineas to be got by carrying off the lady-prize ——"

"You would abandon your chance?" cried the Marquis, eagerly.

"I think I should," responded the royal voluptuary. "But I will not pledge myself on that point, because ——"

"Because the impression produced by the lady in the gossamer costume may wear off?" observed the Marquis.

"No – that is impossible!" exclaimed the Prince. "But because there would be something delightful and entertaining to a degree in triumphing over such men as Curzon, Huntingdon, Malpas, Sackville, and yourself."

"Will you make a bargain with me, sir?" asked Leveson, at the expiration of a few minutes silence.

"Name it," said the Prince Regent.

"If I succeed in obtaining for you your lady in the gossamer dress, you will abandon to me all your chances of success with Venetia Trelawney," explained the nobleman: "and should I carry off the prize through *your* assistance, I undertake to hand over the six thousand guineas to your Royal Highness."

"But how can I possibly put you in my place," demanded the Prince, "supposing that I do avail myself of my turn to call on Venetia, and supposing also that she should look with a favourable eye upon my addresses?"

"Leave that to me," said the Marquis. "Only promise to tell me everything that passes between yourself and Venetia—and if you should succeed in making an impression on her and inducing her to consider your proposals for her to become your mistress ——"

"I will solemnly and sacredly pledge myself to tell you word for word, and detail for detail, all that passes between us," said the Prince: "and I will assist you to the utmost of my power to obtain possession of Venetia — always supposing, as a matter of course, that I experience any encouragement on her part."

"Good!" exclaimed the Marquis. "And in return I will do all I can to throw the gossamer lady into your arms once more."

"And this agreement must of course remain profoundly secret between you and me," observed the Prince.

"Undoubtedly so," replied the Marquis of Leveson.

And as the carriage continued to roll onward at a rapid rate towards London, the Prince Regent and his noble friend beguiled the time in discussing the projects which they had thus initiated.

CHAPTER IX.

LOUISA.

RETURN we now to that beautiful cottage in the neighbourhood of the ancient city of Canterbury, where we first introduced the Stanley family to the reader.

Louisa, the younger sister, has already been described as one of those charming creatures whose winning grace and amiable simplicity, while ravishing the heart of the beholder, encourage no other feelings than those of the purest, tenderest, and holiest character. Unless, indeed, it be a heart that never beats save with a frantic violence of the grossest animal passions: but dread, terrible, and ferocious to an extreme must be the nature of that man who could dare to harbour a dishonouring hope or a vile intent with respect to such a being as Louisa Stanley.

She was but little more than nineteen years of age,—so young, so fair, that it seemed as if heaven could never permit either time or sorrow to trace one line upon the frank and open brow of that loveliest of its creations. Her whole form was characterised by girlish symmetry and womanly elegance, so blended as to constitute alike the grace and the glory of her nineteen summers,—virgin modesty subduing as it were the radiance of her beauty, and bashful timidity serving as a natural veil for that loveliness the perfection of which was not dreamt of by herself.

It would be impossible to conceive a more heavenly being, alike in form and mind. She was not tall—but the sylphid slenderness of her shape made her seem taller than she really was. And though of this nymph-like symmetry, she was not thin, but of exquisite proportions—her figure being characterised by that gradual and easy transition between all the contours and by that beautiful softness of outline which realise the matchless graces of Grecian statues. The impression her appearance left upon the mind was that of exquisite beauty without the faintest tinge of voluptuousness: and lovely though she were, yet did she seem loveable only with an æsthetic tenderness and a chaste affection—not with the ardour of sensual passion or the fervid longings of desire. In a word, she was just such a being concerning whom the wish would be expressed that she might remain in her virgin purity and maiden innocence for ever.

Her dark brown hair was parted above a forehead that looked the chosen seat of candour and where chastity sate enthroned in vesture of stainless white: and the long tresses, glossy and smooth as velvet, formed as it were a frame for the charming countenance. Her complexion was fair—the cheeks not exactly of a rose colour, but of an animated white, so that without being absolutely pale, they were of the delicate bloom which deepens only through emotion or exercise into the vermeil of the peach. The well-cut lips, of bright coral redness, showed that she had the health of youth: sweet lips they were too—not luscious with sensuality of expression—but formed for the smiles of innocent mirth and the kisses of chastest love. The delicately pencilled but arching brows—the deep blue eyes, fringed with

long lashes—the small straight nose—and the softly rounded chin without a dimple, completed the charming face.

We must not however forget to observe that her teeth were of pearly whiteness—that her neck was long and gracefully arching—and that her shoulders had a beautiful slope: nor should we omit to state that her hands were exquisitely formed, with tapering fingers and rose-tinted nails—and that no sculptor could have modelled the feet and ankles of his statue to a more charming symmetry.

Such was Louisa Stanley—one of those heavenly beings for whom the Garden of Eden should have been suffered to remain as a habitation during their sojourn upon earth. For it seemed cruel—Oh! too cruel to expose so bright yet delicate a flower to the bleak winds and cutting blasts of this cold world of our's! In the sequestration of that charming retreat where her existence had hitherto been passed, she was so completely withdrawn from the irregularity of feeling, the conflict of emotions, the distracting influences, and the giddy whirl and bustle of what is called "life," that the natural purity of her soul was cherished and maintained in that innocent inexperience which constituted alike the ornament of her character and the danger of her position. She knew no more of the villanies of the world than a child of the tropics knows of Lapland's eternal ice or of Labrador's incessant storms: and on the other hand, she was as ignorant of all the luxurious pleasures, the voluptuous enjoyments, and the sensual delights in which mankind indulge, as the dweller in hyperborean realms is unacquainted with the fruits of the Indian clime.

Who, then, was to guide this young—this fair—this artless girl over the rough places of the world?—who was to warn her of the shoals, the rocks, and the quicksands which beset the frail bark that bounds over the waves of the stupendous ocean of life? Alas! alas! does not the child disport upon the edge of the yawning gulf, amidst the flowers that conceal the dangerous brink?—does not the innocent bird sip the honey-dew while a serpent glides along the blossom-laden bough, ready to spring?

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Two months have elapsed since Clara and Louisa Stanley parted in front of the cottage-portico,—eight long weeks since they exchanged the farewell kiss beneath that natural canopy of honey-suckles and roses.

And in the meantime what has happened to Louisa?

In order to make all this intelligible to our readers, we must go back to the period at which the separation took place, as described in our First Introductory Chapter.

How anxiously, on the second morning after Clara's departure, did Louisa watch for the coming of the postman! She knew that ten was his time to pass along the road on which the cottage looked: but a full hour before—indeed, as the clocks of the old cathedral and the many churches of Canterbury were striking nine—was the young maiden at the garden-wicket, gazing wistfully in the direction whence he must come. At last he made his appearance: but had he a letter for her? Oh! how quickly and how thrillingly beat every pulse as Louisa's eyes marked his approach! But—behold! he crosses the road—he selects a letter from the packet which he carries in his hand—he comes towards her. Another minute—but what an age of anxiety and suspense was that minute!——and she receives the welcome, oh, so welcome missive!

The handwriting of her dearly-beloved sister is immediately recognised—and, with beating heart and trembling hands, she tears open the letter. It contains a Bank-note: but for this apparent evidence of Clara's success in her mission Louisa recks not—all her interest, all her anxiety, all her thoughts are absorbed in the desire to ascertain whether that sister be coming home again without delay!

But we will give the contents of that letter over which her eyes now ran—or rather swept, with such lightning speed, as if eager to embrace at a single glance all that Clara said:—

"*London, July 17th*, 1814.

"I am safe, well, and happy, my ever dearest Louisa—that is to say, as happy as I can possibly be while absent from home. May God grant, however, that you are still more happy, my darling sister—for there is no amount of happiness that I do not wish you or that you are undeserving to enjoy! I have not much leisure to write at any length to-day. But in a few words I will endeavour to relieve you from all the suspense which I know you are experiencing on my account. I have found Mr. Beckford, who is a kind-hearted, amiable, and excellent old gentleman and takes the deepest interest in all that concerns us. It was entirely through a mistake, which he has explained, that our draught upon him was not honoured; and as a proof that he not only regrets the inconvenience and apprehensions which we may have experienced, he has desired me to forward you the Bank-note for a hundred pounds, which I now enclose. But he will on no account part with me yet. He insists upon me remaining for a few weeks with Mrs. Beckford and himself. How can I possibly refuse? He is our benefactor—our kind friend: his purse is the bounteous source of our subsistence. For it is only through motives of ancient friendship for our poor afflicted aunt and our deceased parents that he thus constitutes himself our benefactor. We have no real claims upon him whatsoever. You will therefore perceive, my dearest sister, that I cannot possibly refuse to be in some way guided by his wishes; and indeed, it is for our mutual interest that I am bound to yield to his request that I should pass a few weeks at his house.

"I need not say, my beloved Loo, how confident I am that you will continue to devote yourself to the saint-like duty of ministering to our afflicted aunt. It is useless to say, '*Remember me most kindly and dutifully to her*,' because heaven has deprived her of the faculty of understanding the message of sincerest affection. But my prayers continue to be offered up on her behalf; and I feel happy in the thought that all the attentions which can possibly surround her are sedulously and tenderly ministered by you.

"I forgot to observe that Mr. Beckford has moved from Hanover Square; and that his present residence is No. 13, Stratton Street, where you must address your letters. I am longing—most ardently longing to hear from you; and shall anxiously await the return of post.

"Your ever affectionate sister,

"CLARA STANLEY."

Over this letter did Louisa shed tears of mingled joy and grief,—joy at the success of her sister's mission and the kindness shown towards her in London—and grief at the thought of being separated from her for some weeks. But youth is not the period when grief can easily outbalance joy;—and therefore the maiden soon wiped away her tears and sate down to write an affectionate answer to Clara's epistle.

This occupied her until nearly mid-day—for she penned a very long letter, full of the tenderest and fondest expressions of sisterly love: and when it was finished she determined upon taking it herself to the post-office in Canterbury and changing the Bank-note at the same time.

It was not often that Louisa quitted the cottage: but when she did, it was in the full conviction that her poor helpless aunt would be properly attended to by the maid-servant. For Mary was a good-tempered, honest, and trustworthy young woman, —very simple-minded and even ignorant - but devoted to the ladies in whose service she had been for four or five years, and especially attached to Miss Louisa.

In her plain but tasteful apparel did the maiden sally forth—and in a quarter of an hour she entered the old city of Canterbury. Her first care was to deposit the letter at the post-office; and thence she repaired to the establishment of the friendly banker of whom we have spoken in our First Introductory Chapter.

To this gentleman she explained the success of her sister's mission, upon which he offered his congratulations: and, having procured change for the note, she took her leave. At the same moment a person, dressed in a clerical suit of black, and who had been receiving cash for a cheque at the banking-house, followed her out;—and, unnoticed by the maiden, he continued to watch her along two or three streets until she entered a grocer's shop at which she was accustomed to deal. There she remained for a few minutes, in order to make some requisite purchases; and on issuing forth again she found herself face to face with the clerically-dressed gentleman whom she had observed at the banker's. He politely made way for her to pass: but instead of entering the shop, he immediately addressed her.

"Pardon me, young lady," he said, "but I wish to give you a friendly hint. I saw you receive a considerable sum of money just now; and you placed the roll of small Bank-notes which you obtained, in that pocket-book which you are now carrying in your hand. Might you not drop it—or leave it inadvertently behind you in some tradesman's shop?"

"I thank you, sir, for your kindness," said Louisa, naturally supposing the advice to be proffered in a friendly and disinterested spirit—especially as the gentleman evidently belonged to the church: and having secured the pocket-book about her person, the young lady saluted the stranger with a graceful inclination of the head, and passed on.

But in a few minutes he was again by her side: and in a voice that was full of benevolence and a manner that denoted a sort of paternal interest, he said, "It seems that we are walking in the same direction: and if you do not demur, I will afford myself the pleasure of escorting you so far as our ways are identical."

Now, in spite of her inexperience, the teachings of her aunt, previous to that good relative's affliction—the education she had received—the results of her useful readings—and her own innate sense of propriety, all made Louisa aware that there was something singular and unusual, if not absolutely indiscreet and improper, in the proposal of the everend gentleman. Accordingly, with an air of true dignity as maidenly as it was lady-like, she said, "I thank you, sir—but I am about to visit several shops:" and she instantaneously entered the establishment of another tradesman with whom she dealt.

In the attention which Louisa now devoted to the purchases which she had to make at this shop, she almost immediately ceased to think of the little incident that had just occurred: but the stranger was all the while waiting at a short distance, until she should come forth again.

He was a man of about forty years of age, and would have been remarkably handsome were it not for the sinister expression of his countenance and the lines which evil passions and dissipation had traced upon his features. His look was therefore disagreeable—or at all events, not prepossessing: but the world believed that it was profound study and deep thought that had fixed an air of settled seriousness upon his face and prematurely marked it with those harsh lines. For, as his apparel denoted, he was a clergyman: and although he had been but a short time resident in Canterbury, yet as his appointment to ecclesiastical preferment in this city had arisen from strong interest in high quarters and from aristocratic connexions, he had not failed to find sycophants and parasites ready to trumpet forth his praises for piety, honour, and moral worth, even before he had given a single proof that he was deserving of such adulation. That he was eloquent as a preacher, was however speedily shown; and eloquence in a parson is frequently taken as a guarantee for godliness likewise. Then, inasmuch as he was often exploring the antique nooks, the subterranean vaults or crypt, and the cloistral curiosities of the fine old cathedral, his reputation as a man of an inquiring disposition and studious cast of mind was confirmed: and thus was he looked upon with respect and veneration by the citizens of Canterbury generally.

He was unmarried, and dwelt in an old but spacious house in the immediate vicinage of the cathedral. This house had once belonged to the monastic establishment which was attached in former times to the venerable pile; and as it stood in a sort of court that was entered by arched passages in one direction, and an old gate-way in another, its site was as gloomy as its aspect. Traditionary superstition declared that the place was haunted; and assuredly, if the shades of the departed ever return to the scenes that were once familiar to them upon earth, the house and the court of which we are speaking appeared precisely those where such spectral visitations would occur.

We have already said that the clergyman's features were handsome: we may add that in person he was tall and well built. He possessed a splendid voice, which he could so modulate as to suit any style of discourse: thus was it sonorous and deep when in the most impressive parts of his sermons or his conversation—melancholy and soft when he wished to appeal to the finer feelings of his listeners—loud and thundering when he chose to be denunciatory—benevolent and plaintive when he spoke as a kind pastor to a docile flock. In the pulpit, especially, he appeared to the utmost advantage: for there, being at too great a distance to allow the congregation to observe the true expression of his features, that countenance seemed

truly and veritably stamped with the traces of profound study, and the deeper marks of a stern conviction and a thorough earnestness of purpose — that is to say, in a religious sense. Thus, when his dark brown hair was thrown back from his ample forehead, and his piercing black eyes flashed the fires that accompanied an impassioned oratory—and when, too, he gesticulated with a violence seldom indulged in by clergymen of the Established Church,—he seemed like a modern Peter the Hermit fulminating against Mussulmans and intent upon gathering proselytes for the insane purpose of a crusade.

Such was the individual who had accosted Louisa Stanley in the manner already described, and who was now waiting for her reappearance from the second shop which she had entered to make purchases. To her he was personally unknown, as the reader has already seen—although had he declared his name she would immediately have recognised it as that of the eminent preacher who had only lately come to reside at Canterbury and of whom she had heard mention made by the few persons of her acquaintance.

It may be well imagined that Louisa Stanley was both amazed and annoyed when, on leaving the shop, she found the clergyman waiting at a little distance. For a moment she stopped short, uncertain whether to proceed or to return into the shop: but reflecting that this latter course would only expose her to much unpleasant observation, if she were to mention the cause of her annoyance, she hastily crossed the street and passed along on the side opposite to that where her tormentor was posted. He did not move, but affected to be occupied in examining some religious prints in a shop window; and Louisa, hastening her pace, emerged from the street and in a few minutes reached that beautiful pleasure-ground known as the Dane John.

This is a large enclosure, containing shady avenues, gardens, and grass-plats. One side is bounded by the remains of the wall that in ancient times belonged to the fortifications, and which is now converted into an agreeable walk. The outer side, protected by a rude stone parapet, with the ruins of watch-towers at short intervals, overlooks the moat, which is now a garden: and the inner side presents to the view a sloping embankment of verdure. In the centre of the Dane John, and with one of its sides abutting against the wall, rises an immense mound, with an easy ascent of circling walks fringed by hedges: and on the top is a marble pillar, the base of which is furnished with seats for the accommodation of those who repair thither to inhale the breeze or to enjoy the splendid prospect which the circumjacent scene affords.

Louisa's shortest way homeward was through the Dane John: and she was threading the beautiful avenue of trees which intersects the enclosure, when she heard footsteps approaching from behind in a hasty manner. Struck by the idea that some one was endeavouring to overtake her, she glanced round—and the next moment the clergyman was by her side.

"I said ere now that our ways were apparently lying in the same direction," he immediately observed, with that blandness of manner and suavity of tone which he knew so well how to assume; "and I was not mistaken. Permit me to escort you ——"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Louisa, with a tremulous voice and timid air, — "but I must respectfully decline ——"

"Young lady, I am a minister of the Gospel," said the clergyman, his tone now becoming solemn and impressive; "and there is no impropriety in your accepting my escort. Is it possible that you hesitate, when my motive is one of kindness? — for I like not to behold a lady of your age wandering thus alone."

"What can there be to fear, sir?" exclaimed Louisa, astonished at the observation.

"Everything!" replied the clergyman. "The world abounds with temptations and perils; and it is the duty of my sacred calling not only to warn the unsuspicious but likewise to defend the unprotected."

"I thank you, sir, most sincerely," murmured Louisa, somewhat alarmed by the vague mention thus made of contingent dangers, and feeling that she had probably behaved ungratefully in showing a disinclination to accept the escort of one whose aspect and bearing displayed so much frankness and benevolence.

"You are young—and doubtless aware that you are beautiful," continued the clergyman, his words suddenly calling up a deep blush to the cheeks of the maiden, whose ideas were also thrown into a strange and painful confusion by language which she now heard for the first time:—"yes, you are young and beautiful," he repeated slowly, as he watched the effect which his remark produced: "and the path of the young and beautiful is always interspersed with hidden pit-falls. Think you that the mission of the clergyman is merely to enunciate these doctrines from the pulpit? No—it is likewise to proclaim them aloud, or to whisper them softly, wherever the warning may seem to be required, and according to circumstances. Hence it is that I have accosted you, young lady: for there is something in your appearance which inspires me with the same interest that I should experience towards a daughter, did I possess one."

Louisa knew not what to think—what to say—or what to do. She felt uneasy—annoyed—embarrassed. It seemed as if two distinct voices were whispering their suggestions in the profundities of her soul,—one telling her that she should not listen to the man who thus forced himself upon her notice—the other assuring her that all he said was sincere and well-meant. She threw a rapid, furtive look upon him—and his countenance was such as to increase her apprehensions: but his voice, as it still sounded in her ears, was fraught with benevolence and paternal kindness. She felt, in fine, as if some vague presentiment of evil had seized upon her, and which she could not shake off, although on the other hand she knew it to be a mere delusion.

At length, feeling the necessity of adopting some decisive course in order to escape from a perplexity which was becoming absolutely painful,—and summoning all her presence of mind to her aid,—she said, "Will you tell me, sir, the nature of those perils which now environ me?"

"First, young lady," returned the reverend gentleman, "be kind enough to say whether you know who I am."

"I do not, sir," answered Louisa: "but I presume that you are a clergyman."

"You have doubtless heard of the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, one of the Minor Canons of Canterbury Cathedral?" said the clergyman, giving utterance to his name and distinctions with the measured tone and deliberate manner of one who felt conscious, or at least expected, that they would make a due impression upon the mind of the hearer.

"I have heard of you, sir," replied Louisa, experiencing that sensation of reverential awe which seizes upon the timid mind when suddenly made aware of the presence of some great or distinguished personage.

"And now, then, will you believe that I am animated by the best and kindest motives in proffering you my counsel?" asked Mr. Audley, in his blandest tones.

"I could not suppose that it was otherwise," said the young maiden. "But you spoke of dangers——"

"Tell me who you are," interrupted the Minor Canon. "Do you dwell in this neighbourhood—with your parents——"

"Alas! sir, I have no parents living," returned Louisa, in a tremulous tone: "but I live at a short distance hence—with an afflicted relative, who has lost the faculties of reason and speech: and an only sister, whom I dearly love, is now on a visit to some friends in London——"

"And you are therefore alone with this afflicted relative?" said Bernard Audley, as his eyes swept with a sort of ravenous expression of desire over the beauteous form of the innocent maiden.

"Alone—with my poor aunt," murmured Louisa, with downcast looks and trembling voice: for the turn which the discourse had just taken, reminded her of her lonely condition and revived her regrets at the absence of her sister.

"Now tell me your name, young lady—and where you live," continued Mr. Audley: "and I will prove a friend to you."

As he thus spoke, his eyes swept rapidly up and down the umbrageous avenue—and, observing no one near, he took the maiden's hand. But, with the instinctive impulse of virgin purity, she instantaneously withdrew it—and at the same moment a young gentleman sprang up from a bench which was deeply set as it were in the shade of some thick evergreens.

His appearance was so sudden and was made with such startling abruptness, that a faint cry of mingled surprise and alarm fell from the lips of Louisa Stanley—while the Canon gave vent to an ejaculation expressive not only of annoyance, but also of recognition with regard to the new-comer.

"Mr. Audley," exclaimed the young gentleman, fixing his eyes indignantly upon the Canon, and speaking in a voice that seemed to imply some conscious power of command over the individual thus imperiously addressed.—"Mr. Audley, this lady cannot possibly be benefitted by *your* friendship. You understand me, sir!"

"But, my dear Mr. Loftus, you mistake me—I can assure you that you are doing me an injustice!" said the Minor Canon, in a tone that was alike entreating and deprecatory.

"Enough, sir! I understand you but too well," returned the young gentleman, with haughty indignation: then, fixing his eyes upon Bernard Audley with a deeper significancy than those looks had even expressed at first he said in a low and rapid whisper, "Remember the scene in the cloister—and begone!"

A cloud, black as night, suddenly overspread the features of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral: and darting a look of diabolical hatred upon the young gentleman, he turned abruptly away and disappeared behind a group of trees forming the angle of a gravel walk that diverged from the great central avenue.

CHAPTER X.

JOCELYN.

The little incident which so promptly disembarrassed Louisa Stanley of the presence of Mr. Bernard Audley and left her in the company of Mr. Loftus, scarcely occupied a minute. But the whole proceeding, brief as it was, naturally excited the utmost wonderment on the part of the young maiden. She did not however catch those last words that had produced such sudden and talismanic effect upon the Canon by so forcibly reminding him of some scene in the Cathedral cloister: but she saw enough to convince her at the instant that Mr. Loftus exercised a potent sway over the reverend gentleman.

Trembling and almost sinking with the prolonged excitement caused by the whole tenour of the Canon's conduct towards her, and which had just experienced so singular a termination, Louisa was pale as death and looked as if she were about to faint. The young gentleman hastened to assist her to the bench where he himself had just before been seated: and remaining standing in her presence, he besought her to calm her agitation.

There was something so touchingly kind—so deeply sympathetic—so tenderly reassuring in his voice and manner, that Louisa felt as if she were being addressed by some tried, well known, and valued friend: and raising her blue eyes, she looked up with all the eloquence of silent gratitude beaming in her countenance. For she felt that Mr. Loftus had done her some signal service by ridding her of the presence of the Canon—although her ideas upon the subject were still confused, vague, and undefined.

The young gentleman was about two or three and twenty years of age, and remarkably handsome. His complexion was a clear rich brown, with the glow of health upon the cheeks. His jet black hair, fine and glossy as that of a woman, was worn long and curled naturally; and his large dark eyes beamed with intelligence, while his lofty forehead appeared the seat of the noblest thoughts. His profile was completely rectilinear and in the purest style of Grecian manly beauty—the nose being perfectly straight, and the upper lip short and curved, like those of the ancient statues of Apollo. In the expression of his countenance frankness and candour were blended with intellectuality and the light of genius: indeed, nothing could be more prepossessing than the appearance of Jocelyn Loftus.

He was not particularly tall; but his slender figure, upright as a dart, was modelled to the most

perfect masculine symmetry. He was well dressed, but without finery or pretension; and his manners were elegant and fascinating, without the slightest tinge of reserve and hauteur on the one hand, or affectation and familiarity on the other. He was just such a young man whose attentions could not fail to give pleasure to the purest-minded maiden, nor be received with impunity where the heart was previously disengaged.

Such was Jocelyn Loftus, the origin of whose acquaintance with Louisa Stanley has just been described. How he came to interfere in her behalf, when he saw her walking with the Minor Canon of the Cathedral, and when this individual endeavoured to take her hand, may be explained to the reader as he himself accounted for it to the young lady herself. He was seated in the shady nook when he overheard a voice say, "*Now tell me your name, young lady, and where you live—and I will prove a friend to you.*" Being familiar with that voice, he leant forward and beheld the Canon in company with a fair young creature whose entire appearance breathed innocence, artless candour, and bashful timidity. Now, from something which Jocelyn knew relative to the character and the proceedings of the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, he did not for a moment think that the friendship of such an individual could be at all beneficial to the young lady: indeed, he felt assured that such friendship was only proffered with the vilest and basest intentions. Moreover, Jocelyn was so struck by Louisa's appearance that he felt convinced she was all she seemed—an angel of artlessness and purity as well as of loveliness: and hence was it that in obedience to the sudden impulse of his generous nature and chivalric disposition, he at once sprang forward to rescue her from the insidious wiles and serpent-like duplicity of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

Such was the explanation of Jocelyn's proceedings: and as Louisa Stanley really felt very ill after the prolonged excitement of the scene with the clergyman and the startling event which had brought it to so abrupt a conclusion, she did not hesitate to accept the proffered escort of her new acquaintance as far as her own home. On reaching the garden-wicket he paused and with the most delicate courtesy took his leave—but not without having solicited permission to call and inquire after the young lady's health on the following day.

The visit was paid accordingly—and the acquaintance between the young couple was improved. Jocelyn, who knew more of the world than Louisa had ever dreamt of, but who was still altogether unspoilt and uncontaminated by that experience, was as much amazed as delighted to discover that in the little secluded Eden of that picturesque spot an angel dwelt. His acquaintance with the female sex had hitherto been confined to the sphere of fashion and wealth; and in the splendid saloons of the palatial mansions belonging to the British aristocracy, had he seen enough to render him suspicious and mistrustful of the feminine character generally. But now he discovered that it was quite possible for a divine beauty, a sweet temper, an intellectual disposition, and an artless soul, to blend their attractions and combine their fascinations so as to form a being as adorably faultless as any creation of the romancist's or poet's fancy

The visit, then, which Jocelyn Loftus paid to inquire after Louisa's health was not the last and only call which he made at the cottage. He solicited permission to return another day—and the young maiden knew no reason why she should object. He *did* return, therefore: and this second visit led to a third—and the third to a fourth—and so on. By degrees, as they grew more familiar—or rather, better acquainted—they walked together in the garden; and in a short time Jocelyn began to assist Louisa in tending the shrubs and tying up the flowers. Then he brought some fresh plants which he procured from a neighbouring nursery-ground; and he set them with his own hands—the first time in his life that he had ever done such a thing!

He was a good musician—and they played and sang together: for the cottage contained a piano—it having been already stated that the aunt had spared no expense consistent with her humble means, in order to give her nieces an excellent education and teach them all lady-like accomplishments. Jocelyn was a good draughtsman as well as musician: and he aided Louisa in her drawings. Then, as their intimacy thus progressed, he brought her some new music and some beautiful prints: and when he proffered these gifts,—such gifts as she might accept with the strictest propriety,—it was with the same delicacy that pervaded the entire tenour of his conduct towards the lovely girl. Indeed, had she been his sister, his behaviour could not have been characterised by attentions more creditable to his own noble nature, or better calculated to secure the esteem and win the good opinion of the purest-minded maiden.

Thus did a few weeks pass away. In the interval Louisa and Clara were constantly corresponding with each other; and the younger sister frankly and ingenuously narrated to the elder all the details of her progressing acquaintance with Jocelyn Loftus. Clara, in her letters from London, gently and delicately insinuated, rather than positively and directly enjoined, the necessity of Louisa's adopting all possible caution with regard to this acquaintance. A passage from one of her letters will show how she touched upon the matter:—

"With regard to Mr. Loftus, my dearest Louisa, I cannot possibly see any harm in your continuing to receive his visits—since you speak of him in terms which prove to me that he is a good, well-meaning, and honourable young man. You give me such ample details relative to those visits and all that passes on the occasion, that I am competent to judge of them as fully as if I myself were present. There is much in the behaviour of Mr. Loftus which commends him to my esteem, and makes me long to know him. The fact that he invariably calls in the middle of the day, at a time when you may be reasonably supposed to be disengaged, is delicate and thoughtful on his part. I should be less pleased if he ever presented himself at the cottage in the evening, when you are more particularly occupied with the attentions needed by our afflicted aunt. I am also charmed to perceive that he has never thought of requesting permission to become the companion of your walks—and that when he has once or twice met you in the streets of Canterbury, he has merely stopped to address you for a few moments and not offered to accompany you. All this bespeaks on his part a due appreciation of the delicate courtesy which a young unmarried gentleman is bound to pay towards a young unmarried lady. That he has never accepted any refreshment when you have offered it, is another proof, however trivial it may appear, of his thorough good-breeding—or, what is better still, of his

refined propriety of conduct. In a word, it is quite evident that he treats you with the high consideration due to your unprotected and almost lonely position: he adopts the delicate bearing of a brother or sincere friend—and all his proceedings are stamped with the evidence of a settled purpose to merit your good opinion. I am certain, on the other hand, that you, my darling Louisa, will so comport yourself as to deserve his good opinion in return."

A short time after Clara had written the letter in which the above passage occurred, she addressed another epistle to her sister in the following terms:—

"London, September 16th, 1814.

"You mentioned, my dearest Loo, in your affectionate letter of the 7th instant, that Mr. Loftus had solicited you to furnish him with my address in London; and you wondered for what purpose he could possibly require it. But the same post which brought me that letter of yours, in which you record the incident, likewise brought me one from Mr. Loftus. And now, my darling Louisa, before I tell you what Mr. Loftus has said to me in his letter, permit me to congratulate you most sincerely—most ardently—most enthusiastically, upon having formed such an acquaintance. He is the very impersonation of honour, generosity, and manly delicacy; and you ought to love him—nay, I am sure that you *do* love, although perhaps this feeling is as yet unsuspected on your part.

"And now for the letter which Jocelyn Loftus has addressed to me. He begins by saying that inasmuch as our aunt is incapacitated by her afflictions from listening to him, and as I am your elder sister, he deems it right to solicit my permission before he whispers a certain communication in your ears. He represents to me that his parents have long been dead—that he belongs to an excellent family—that he is entirely his own master—and that he possesses an income of six hundred pounds a-year. As a proof of his pecuniary position he refers me to his banker; and I have just ascertained that his statement is perfectly correct. Moreover, the banker speaks admirably of him. Thus far, then, everything is in Jocelyn's favour; and it is for you to judge, my dear Louisa, whether his temper, disposition, and personal appearance be agreeable to you. I am sure that you will answer in the affirmative. In plain terms, then, Mr. Loftus desires my permission to make you a proposal of marriage: he says that he has now known you for nearly two months, and that although

the interval be short, yet it has proved quite long enough to make him acquainted with all *your* good qualities, and convince him that he cannot be happy without you. I have written him an answer by this same post, to the effect that I feel honoured by the compliment he has paid me in thus frankly and candidly explaining his social position and desiring my sanction to his suit; and I have added that so far as I am concerned, it would afford me the utmost happiness to behold my sister the wife of such a man. The matter, therefore, now rests with you, my Louisa—for I have no doubt that Jocelyn will immediately open his mind to you.

"With regard to myself, I am happy and comfortable: but Mr. and Mrs. Beckford will not part with me. Indeed, at present, I see no chance of their allowing me to return home. They talk of adopting me and leaving me all their fortune—and as you, my dear Louisa, will soon be comfortably settled and handsomely provided for, I must of course look after myself. Jocelyn tells me in his letter that should he be fortunate enough to see his fondest hopes realised by becoming your husband, he will take you and aunt to a beautiful house which he possesses in a northern country and where you shall still be enabled to continue your kind attentions towards our afflicted relative. In fact, his forethought is in every way most generous—most honourable—most affectionate.

"God bless you, dearest Loo: and once more accept the sincerest congratulations of your loving sister,

"CLARA STANLEY."

The reader has already been informed that the Canterbury postman was in the habit of passing the cottage at about ten o'clock;—and it was therefore at that hour, in the morning of the 11th of September, that Louisa Stanley received her sister's long and interesting communication. And truly it revealed to her—or at all events gave her the full explanation of the feeling which she cherished in her heart relative to Jocelyn Loftus! Yes—she now knew that she loved him—the key to the solution of the mystery of her own sensations had been afforded her—and it was as if a light had suddenly blazed up in her soul, illuminating that innermost sanctuary into whose depths her mental vision had been unable to penetrate before!

But we said that it was ten o'clock when she received her sister's letter—and in about a couple of hours Jocelyn would call. Unless indeed he should come even earlier than usual: and she fancied—yes, and secretly *hoped*—that he might. Then, as she felt herself thus hoping, she caught herself blushing likewise at the same time;—and from that instant she perceived that the sweetness of this nascent love of her's was mingling with every thought—penetrating every emotion—lending its inspiration as it were to every feeling—imparting radiance to every smile and tenderness to every sigh!

Oh! the exquisite bliss—the purity—the chastity of a young virgin's love! Calling forth all the music of her soul—teaching her that profound and ineffable idolatry in which the youthful heart only can be a worshipper—leading her to live amidst bright realities and far brighter dreams—conjuring up those exquisite imaginings that tinge with such roseate hues the pathway of the future—idealizing the most refined image of the heavenly passion—seeming boundless, illimitable, infinite as a rich incense that fills the earth to the very vaults of heaven with its exquisite perfume—bathing all the senses in a fount of bliss, till existence itself seems to melt away into oblivion,—such is the young maiden's first love!

Yes—and it appears as if the spirit of a celestial melody poured its effluence into her soul, attuning all her feelings—all her thoughts—all her emotions, to this passion so new to her! And within the final realms of the heart, as the mental vision looks deeply inward, the image of the loved one is found impressed:—and the mind experiences bliss in the thought that it cherishes a deathless sentiment. Oh! how the fancy disports and gambols, on unwearied wing, in the paradise of its own creation! For such is Love, in the infancy of its passion: 'tis the golden-hued honey which Providence has placed upon the brims of life's bitter cup;—and the heart feels as if it must perish were the spell that enthrals it to be no more!

We said that Louisa—the young, the charming, the beauteous Louisa—both fancied and hoped that Jocelyn *might* come a little before his usual hour: and she was not disappointed. He had received Clara's letter—he had obtained the elder sister's sanction to his suit—and he felt assured that he should not have to plead in vain at the feet of the gentle Louisa.

It was not much past eleven in the forenoon when he arrived at the cottage. The maiden was in the garden—and she sped to open the wicket. But how her hand trembled and how sweetly confused did she look as she thus gave admittance to her admirer, whose handsome countenance was radiant with hope, and love, and triumph. For he saw by Louisa's manner that Clara had communicated with her upon the *one* absorbing topic: and as this was *his* first love also, he experienced a joy ineffable, as the blush upon her damask cheek already gave the answer to his suit!

We shall not detail the conversation which now took place between them as they insensibly sought the shadiest part of the garden. Suffice it to say that Jocelyn Loftus told his tale of love with all the eloquence which usually marks such tale, even though when told for the first time: and, animated with a blushing joy, did the young virgin listen in a confusion sweeter and more charming than any she had yet displayed. Then, on being pressed to give utterance to the response that was to confirm all the fond expectations and ratify the hopes of her lover, with downcast looks did she murmur the monosyllable which falls in such a case with so delicious a music upon the ear and sinks down with so exquisite a thrill of pleasure into the heart.

Yes! The word was spoken—nor did she wish it recalled. And now for the first time did Jocelyn venture to glide his arm around that sylph-like form and press those lips that were until that moment virgin of the kiss of man. Blushing and trembling, the maiden received the caress that ratified the vows pledged to her by the devoted and adoring Jocelyn: and then how proud—oh! how proud did he feel in the consciousness that he owned the love and possessed the heart whose pure feelings now shone in sweet irradiation upon that angelic countenance!

For some hours did they rove together in the garden—those hours gliding away as if they were only minutes: and then they parted—but with smiles, because they knew that they should soon meet again. And on the morrow they thus met—and for the two or three days following in the same manner: and on the fourth day Jocelyn no longer refused to remain and partake of the frugal repast

with Louisa. But he stayed also to tea;—and in the evening they sate in the garden and conversed upon all the topics that were now so dear to them.

His arm clasped her waist—and her dark tresses fell in rich clusters upon his shoulders. But not an impure thought—not an unholy desire marred the divinity of that bliss which the young man experienced: while innocent happiness beamed in Louisa's eyes—those eyes that seemed so much of heaven's own blessed light brought down to earth!

And it was as they were thus seated in the seclusion of a shady arbour, unconscious of all that was passing elsewhere—absorbed in their own delicious dream of love—that through the hedge ferocious eyes were glaring upon them,—eyes in which devouring desires mingled with an intense envy and a burning hate.

For Bernard Audley, the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral, was watching them thus: and retreating after a while as noiselessly and as unobserved as he had approached the verdant barrier, he muttered with a concentrated bitterness of tone and a look of desperate resolve, "By heaven! she shall yet be mine—she shall be mine!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FOUR SISTERS.

THE incidents contained in the two preceding chapters, which have been devoted to the charming Louisa, fill up the interval that had elapsed from the separation of the sisters in the middle of August, and bring down that portion of the narrative to the middle of September.

We must now therefore take a temporary leave of the cottage in the vicinage of Canterbury, and transport our readers to the mansion of Mrs. Owen at Richmond.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning, the day after the visit of the Prince of Wales and the Marquis of Leveson to that lady's abode, that we shall find the three eldest sisters—Agatha, Emma, and Julia—assembled in the back drawing-room. The weather was charming—the windows were open—and while the two last-named girls were gazing forth upon the beautiful prospect which the casement commanded, Agatha was lounging in an indolent manner upon a cushion which she had thrown on the carpet. In this attitude of complete abandonment she turned over the pages of an album in which the Prince Regent had himself written a few lines of tolerable poetry, and which also contained effusions from the pens of several personages more distinguished for their great names than their great talents.

As for Mary, the youngest sister—she was closetted at that moment with her mother, in this lady's own chamber; and from the observations which passed between the three girls in the drawing-room, it was evident that the circumstance was a source of much interest and speculation with them.

"I wonder whether mamma is giving Mary precisely the same lecture which she has already bestowed on each of us in our turns," said Emma, with an arch smile, full of wicked meaning.

"I suppose she will tell Mary how far to go and where she must stop short," observed Julia, laughing.

"And it is to be hoped that she will follow that advice as well as we have done," said Agatha, looking up from her recumbent position on the carpet and smiling with even a more charming wickedness than either of her sisters.

"Hush!" whispered Emma as footsteps approached the door.

The next moment Mary, the youngest girl, entered the room. Emma and Julia bounded towards her—and Agatha, rising from the floor, also advanced and joined the group.

Mary was pale and agitated: she even looked as if she had been frightened—and her young bosom was rising and falling with rapid palpitations. The reader will be pleased to recollect that she was only sixteen—whereas Agatha, the eldest girl, was twenty-two. Emma and Julia were respectively twenty and eighteen.

"Well, Mary dear—what has mamma been saying to you?" inquired her three sisters, all as it were in the same breath. "But come and sit down and tell us everything."

"Oh! I dare say you are enlightened enough upon the subject," exclaimed the young girl petulantly, as her sisters led her to the sofa and placed themselves around her: and as she spoke, her eyes filled with tears and her cheeks burnt with crimson blushes.

"Calm your agitation, Mary—get rid of this excitement," said Agatha, in a soothing tone. "We can pretty well guess what our mother has been whispering in your ears—and depend upon it, the advice is good."

"But it took me so much by surprise," murmured Mary, in a broken and tremulous tone: "and it seems to have left upon my mind a feeling as if I had experienced a shock——"

"Which feeling will speedily wear off, my love," said Agatha.

"But since you know all this," exclaimed Mary, looking reproachfully upon her three sisters, "why did you never drop me a hint or whisper a word in my ears, so as to prepare me for the extraordinary lessons which I have just received—and from the lips of my own mother too?"

"Mamma is a woman of the world, you see, Mary," replied Agatha; "and she is resolved that her daughters shall be women of the world also. You blame us for our reserve towards you on certain particulars—but it was not for us to undertake the task of initiation. Had we babbled prematurely and gossipped with you as you seem to think we ought to have done, we should have neglected one of the principal lessons that mamma taught us and which has no doubt been duly impressed upon your mind within the last hour."

"Yes—duplicity," exclaimed Mary, with a bitterness of tone and an agitation of manner. "Henceforth I am to use all these smiles and all that gaiety which until now were the free and spontaneous ebullition of spirits naturally buoyant and a disposition unaffectedly cheerful,—I am to use those smiles and that gaiety, I repeat, as a veil to cover selfishness, hypocrisy, artifice, and deceit. Oh! I am to exist as a living lie—a breathing falsehood—an animated cheat—the impersonation of untruth——"

"And what will you gain by all the ingenuousness, frankness, and artlessness in the world?" demanded Agatha. "Think you, my poor girl, that the dry bread moistened with the tears of suffering virtue is very palatable?—or will you not agree with us that it is better to enjoy luxuries of every kind, though pur

chased at some sacrifice of the better feelings which nature has implanted within us?"

"It may be so," observed Mary, her agitation subsiding and yielding to thoughtfulness: then, after a long pause, she said, "I have no doubt that I shall soon think as you do: but at first it is painful—yes, very painful to receive such lessons and be enjoined to pursue such a course of training. 'Tis the same as if a beautiful picture on which the eye was gazing with rapturous admiration, suddenly changed into an assemblage of loathsome reptiles."

"And did you positively believe, Mary, that the world was so fair a scene?" inquired Agatha.

"How could I think otherwise?" asked the young girl, with a profound sigh. "Mamma never opened her lips upon the subject until to-day—you were all three equally reserved——"

"And you, Mary," interrupted Agatha, "were very short-sighted."

"Yes—I was indeed!" said the young girl, mournfully. "But now my eyes are fully opened—and I perceive that for some time past I have been going through a course of preparatory training without suspecting it. In fact," she added, with quivering lips and burning cheeks, "the very sports and pastimes which I looked upon as so innocent, have been purposely intended to undermine all delicacy of feeling—all rectitude of principle——"

"And now you are going to whine again and whimpes, like a great school-girl," exclaimed Emma, sharply.

"Silly thing that you are!" added Julia, still more angrily.

"You are wrong thus to upbraid poor Mary," said Agatha, speaking to the two young ladies in a tone of rebuke. "Let us argue with her—and not scold. Remember, Miss Emma, that you were alarmed and frightened at first—and you, Miss Julia, were as much shocked as Mary is now——"

"Well, Mary will forgive us for a momentary unkindness," exclaimed Emma and Julia, embracing their youngest sister, who threw her arms around their necks and sobbed and wept as she kissed them tenderly.

"And now, my dear girl," said Agatha, "tell us all that our mother has been whispering in your ears, so that we may understand to what extent her explanations have gone."

"I do not know whether I can arrange all the details of mamma's discourse in consecutive order," replied Mary, endeavouring to compose her feelings as well as she was able: "but the purport of it has necessarily made such an impression upon my mind, that I can never forget it. First, however, I should observe that it never struck me until this morning that there was anything remarkable or strange in the intimacy which subsists between the Princes and our family: I had never given the subject a thought. For the last three or four years I have been accustomed to see them visit the house and treat us all in the most friendly manner—and on no occasion did I think of asking myself the meaning of this intimacy. Then the pastimes and recreations—the blindman's buff, hunt the slipper, and kiss-in-the-ring—all the familiarities, in fine——"

"Were naturally looked upon by you as innocent and meaningless," observed Agatha.

"Yes," replied Mary: "whereas the whole routine has been part and parcel of a means systematically adopted to inure our minds to every species of levity short of actual frailty," added the young girl, her cheeks once more suffused with the burning blushes of shame.

Agatha, Emma, and Julia exchanged rapid and significant looks;—and then the eldest again encouraged Mary to proceed with her explanation of what had passed between Mrs. Owen and herself.

"Having hitherto entertained such innocent impressions relative to the visits of the Princes and the amusements in which we indulged with them," continued Mary, "I was astonished when I just now heard from mamma's lips that the whole was a deliberate and preconceived system adopted for the purpose of training our minds into a particular course. Nor less was I amazed and afflicted, when my own mother began to explain to me how the path to fortune lay through the realms of duplicity and deceit, and not through the regions of frankness and rectitude. Oh! to me these doctrines appeared detestable and abhorrent, especially when coming from the lips of a mother! But, then, as she herself assured me, she is a woman of the world—and had she pursued a course perfectly consistent with the dictates of her conscience, she would be a pauper in a workhouse or a mendicant in the streets, with her four daughters famishing around her. She adopted another career—she sacrificed her better feelings—she yielded to circumstances—or rather she flung herself with complete abandonment upon the tide of events;—and the results may be recognised in the ease, comfort, and even luxury in which she has lived and reared her children. The lessons wherein she has this day initiated me, have therefore been to the effect that wealth is the grand aim which I must ever keep in view—and that in order to reach it, I must hesitate at no meanness, no selfishness, no falsehood, no duplicity! I am to bear in mind that it is better to become the mistress of a rich man than the wife of a poor one—that splendid guilt is not guilt at all, but that virtuous poverty is the greatest of crimes. I am to accustom myself to the familiarities, the caresses, and the toyings of the Princes, in order to be enabled to keep a constant control and mastery over my passions—so that by inuring myself to all that may excite the feelings and play upon the senses, I may with ease offer resistance when it does not suit my selfish interests to surrender my virtue. I am to become a thorough hypocrite in everything—to be ready in the adoption of any artifice that may serve my purposes—to be able to smile upon an enemy if need be—and to lavish the tenderest caresses upon any one whom it may suit me to ruin. In fine, I am so to discipline all my passions, all my feelings, all my emotions, that they shall become my slaves and not my masters—that they shall be rendered subservient to my purposes, instead of exercising any influence over my destiny,—so that when I err, it may not be through weakness, but deliberately and intentionally on my side—and when I appear to be succumbing in the melting mood of woman's natural tenderness, I shall in reality be only playing a part in which my passions have not the slightest sympathy. I am to resemble the proficient actress upon the stage, who can call up tears—wreathe her countenance into beaming smiles—bestow or receive the most passionate caresses—burst into sudden indignation—relapse into winning softness—faint, swoon—laugh or pray—and all this at a moment's warning and without an effort!"

"Such has been the substance of our mother's lec-

ture. Mary?" said Agatha, who, as well as Emma and Julia, had listened with deep attention and interest to the young girl's explanation. "Well—and you will follow it to the very letter? For doubtless our mother did not forget to tell you that she is not the only parent who brings up her daughters with these ideas, although there are not many mothers perhaps who go so far as to inculcate them positively and directly by means of words. The training to which we are thus subjected, is precisely that which prevails throughout the world of fashion, where everything is false—heartless—hollow—selfish. Generally speaking, however, aristocratic, titled, and wealthy mothers rear their children in this manner, without having the courage or the frankness to explain the real motives of such unnatural training. Our mother has displayed that courage and that frankness. She says, '*Such has been the training, and such are the uses to which you must put it.*' She has not left us to find out as best we may the meaning and the purport of this artificial education. Whatever she may be in the presence of the world, she is not a hypocrite with her own children. In fine, she has already carved out for us a certain career on which we are immediately to enter ——"

"And which explains the cause of the visits and intimacy of the Princes at our house," observed Mary. "Mamma did not fail to tell me this much."

"You know, then, for what service we are destined?" said Agatha, inquiringly. "But I see that you do ——"

"Yes," responded the young girl. "And I think that I can now give you a piece of intelligence, which mamma will doubtless communicate to you presently. For a letter arrived while I was closetted with her just now ——"

"A letter of importance?" exclaimed the three eldest sisters, all speaking together and with intense eagerness. "From Windsor?"

"Yes—from the Queen," answered Mary.

"Oh! I am glad to hear this!" cried Agatha, her countenance becoming radiant with joy.

"And do you know, dear Mary, whether it is all settled?" inquired Julia.

"I believe so," rejoined the youngest sister. "At all events, mamma is going up to London to see the Prince Regent presently; and she hopes that when she returns home in the afternoon she will bring word that we are to prepare for immediate departure."

"What a pity," exclaimed Emma, "that the Queen's letter did not arrive yesterday: mamma would then have been able to communicate it to the Prince when he was here last night ——"

"Well, a few hours more or less will not make much difference," observed Agatha: "but it is certainly high time that we should enter upon this career for which we have been destined for three or four years past."

"Better late than never," said Emma. "Oh! how we shall enjoy ourselves!" she added, clapping her hands in an effusion of glee.

"And what new scenes we shall behold!" cried Julia.

"And how agreeable it will be to receive the recompense for our services at the end of the time!" said Agatha.

"But such services as they are!" exclaimed Mary, with a shudder, as she flung affrighted looks upon her three sisters. "Oh! would it not be better for those who are about to employ us,—would it not be better, I ask, to send four venomous snakes at once ——"

"Hush!" ejaculated Agatha, with mingled sternness and petulance. "Just now I took your part when your sisters were harsh with you, Mary: but I cannot permit you to talk in this manner. Perish all compunction when a fortune is to be made!" she added energetically.

"Yes—such also must be my motto, I perceive," murmured the young girl, with a voice and manner expressive of that resignation which is akin to despair.

And then her three sisters, seeing that it was useless to chide her for what they termed her "weakness," addressed themselves to the task of consoling and encouraging her.

CHAPTER XII.

TUESDAY: OR, THE SECOND SUITOR.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon; and Venetia Trelawney was seated in her drawing-room at Acacia Cottage.

She was alone—elegantly dressed—and apparently expecting a visitor: for she was neither reading nor working, nor yet amusing herself with the birds—and every time a vehicle was passing in the road she listened to hear if it stopped at her dwelling.

The windows on that side were shut: but those overlooking the park were open, as on the previous day—and the sunbeams that penetrated through the curtains, shone on her superb auburn hair and made it glow like velvet of golden tissue. The slight flush of expectation was upon her cheeks: but from her manner it did not appear that she anticipated either pleasure or pain from the visit thus awaited;—it was merely the little excitement produced by a resolve to play a particular part, and the anxiety to accomplish it with success.

She looked at the time-piece on the mantel—then at her watch—and she found that they corresponded in proclaiming the hour to be three o'clock. Then she rose from her seat—took a perfumed billet from a vase—and ran her eyes over the contents, which were as follow:—

"*Mount Street, Berkeley Square,*
"*September 17th*, 1814.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon presents his compliments to Miss Trelawney; and having yesterday purchased a small estate at Knightsbridge, consisting of a few houses, of which Acacia Cottage is one, Sir Douglas contemplates certain improvements in the property. But as he would on no account make any alteration which might be disagreeable to Miss Trelawney, whom he is proud and happy thus to enumerate amongst his tenants, he would feel infinitely obliged if Miss Trelawney would favour him with a few moments' interview this day. Sir Douglas will therefore take the liberty of paying his respects to Miss Trelawney between two and three o'clock in the afternoon."

"Yes—his appointment is specific enough," murmured Venetia to herself, as she threw back the note into the porcelain vase: "but doubtless he considers it fashionable and consistent with good taste to be the least thing late!"

Scarcely had she made this reflection to herself, when a handsome carriage drove up to the door—and in a few moments the serious-looking old livery-ser-

vant ushered Sir Douglas Huntingdon into the drawing-room.

We have already stated that the baronet, who was about six or seven and twenty years of age, was naturally good-looking, but that his appearance was rendered somewhat sickly by dissipation. He dressed with as much taste as elegance: his manners were prepossessing—and he was endowed with considerable intellectual powers, if he chose to exert them.

Venetia was standing when he entered the room; and having requested him to be seated on a chair which she indicated with a graceful motion of the arm, she placed herself on a sofa at some little distance.

With one rapid glance she surveyed the baronet from head to foot—and the reflection which passed through her mind, was, "He is exactly as he was described to me." On the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon swept his eyes over Venetia's entire form, embracing every beauty in that first look: and the reflection which passed through *his* mind, was, "She is more exquisitely charming than I had even fancied from seeing her at a distance!"

Be it remembered that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was the gentleman who, at the Marquis of Leveson's table a few days previously, had told the anecdote of the blank cheque sent by a certain Duke to Venetia, and returned to his Grace by the young lady without a syllable of comment,—which anecdote the dissipated baronet had narrated as an argument in favour of a previous assertion that he had made, to the effect that Miss Trelawney was "as virtuous as she was incomprehensible." We only remind the reader of these little circumstances in order to show the opinion that Sir Douglas Huntingdon entertained of the young lady, of whom he was in reality deeply enamoured and in whose presence he had now found means to introduce himself.

"You will pardon the liberty which I have taken in thus enacting the cold and formal part of a landlord towards a tenant," began the baronet, with a half smile: "whereas the more fitting vocation would have been that of a worshipper at the shrine of beauty——"

"And if you had to grant me a lease or sign a deed of sale with respect to Acacia Cottage," interrupted Venetia, with mingled archness and irony, "should you insert compliments and flatteries in the document?"

"The only proper compliment in such a case," returned the baronet, "would be to make the document a deed of gift."

"Well, if you intend to call at every one of your newly-purchased houses and behave to each tenant in the same liberal manner," observed Venetia, with the utmost readiness of repartee, "I am afraid that your property will prove but a bad bargain."

"But if my proposal were a mere exception in your favour, Miss Trelawney?"

"Oh! in that case I should refuse it, because I could not think of exciting the envy of my neighbours."

"They need know nothing of the matter," said the baronet, smiling.

"A generous action should never be kept secret," answered Venetia. "But, jesting apart, Sir Douglas Huntingdon—we will proceed to business, if you please. You have purchased the estate on which this house stands—and you are desirous to make improvements? Is it not so?"

"It is, Miss Trelawney," answered the baronet: "and I was anxious to consult your own views and tastes upon the subject——"

"But I am neither skilled as an architect nor in laying out gardens, Sir Douglas," exclaimed Venetia, with a peculiar smile which expressed a good-tempered irony.

"You notwithstanding possess an exquisite taste," observed the baronet, glancing round the well-furnished drawing-room.

"Oh! I will not rob my upholsterer of any of the credit which is wholly and solely due to himself," said Venetia, with that cheerfulness of repartee which constituted so gentle and lady-like a rebuke for any compliments or flatteries that were paid her.

"Are you determined, Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the baronet, laughing, "not to permit me to consult you in this matter?"

"I am so completely indifferent to it, Sir Douglas Huntingdon," was the answer, "that it positively is not worth while. So long as you do not build up the walls of my garden to the height of the house—or brick up the windows—or level the Cottage altogether——"

"Well, Miss Trelawney," cried the baronet, still laughing gaily, "if you do not choose to regard my visit in a business-like point of view, I can assure you that I am all the more contented—indeed, all the happier. I would much sooner enjoy the privilege of calling upon you as an acquaintance—in the hope that I might some day be regarded as a friend——"

"As for friendship, Sir Douglas Huntingdon," interrupted Venetia, "I am afraid that its realities have long ago been absorbed in what may be termed the artificialities of fashionable life and worldly pursuits."

"Oh! Miss Trelawney," exclaimed her visitor, "you cannot possibly be sceptical with regard to the existence of a pure and disinterested friendship."

"But it does not spring up as a matter of course, just because two individuals come to a verbal agreement upon the subject," replied Venetia, in a tone of gentle sarcasm.

"The earnest, sincere, and enthusiastic devotion of one individual towards another, must inevitably beget a reciprocal feeling in the heart of the latter," said the baronet.

"My reading has never taught me such a faith," remarked Miss Trelawney, affecting to consider the subject seriously for a few moments.

"I will admit that my observation applied rather to love than to friendship," rejoined the baronet, surveying the beauteous creature with a look of tender significance.

"Oh! what singular digressions our discourse is taking," cried Venetia, in a tone of good-tempered raillery. "A landlord calls upon his tenant for the avowed purpose of talking on houses and gardens—and he enlightens her mind with a homily upon friendship and love."

"Because the fair tenant herself inspires the subject," returned the baronet: then, before Venetia had time to utter a single syllable in response, he said, "Miss Trelawney, I wish to be candid with you—will you pardon me for the frankness that is about to characterise my speech?"

"Is it concerning the houses and the gardens?" she inquired, with an admirable affectation of ingenuousness and *naïveté*.

"Oh! pray do not dwell any longer upon that horrid

business-topic," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a tone of entreaty: "or rather, if we must speak of my estates and my property, let it be only in this manner—that I am prepared to lay all my fortune at your feet!"

"You have already offered me Acacia Cottage as a gift," said Venetia, with a blush and a smile; "and now you propose to confer all your possessions upon me. Such unusual liberality—from an entire stranger——"

"Do not mistake me, I implore you," interrupted Sir Douglas, eagerly. "I intend to base my offer upon terms to which you may at least listen without anger——"

"And those terms?" said Venetia, with an air of mingled amazement and incredulity.

"Marriage, adored one!" exclaimed the baronet, falling upon his knees in her presence.

"Rise, sir—rise—this is too ridiculous," said Venetia, with that tone and manner of dignified and at the same time good-tempered rebuke which showed that she did not think it worth while to take the matter in a particularly serious light, nor to invest it with any undue importance. "You are evidently a good-natured, well-meaning man—and I cannot find it in my heart to be positively vexed with you. But——"

"But you do not think that I am serious?" exclaimed the baronet, rising from his suppliant posture and looking very crest-fallen.

"If I did not suppose you to be serious in offering me marriage," said Miss Trelawney, now speaking with all the dignity which woman knows so well how to assume and which becomes her so loftily,—"I should spurn you with indignation and order my lacquey to eject you from my presence. But as I *do* believe you to be serious in making me an honourable proposal, I can only reject it with politeness—at the same time begging you to observe how silly and ridiculous it is to take such a step after an acquaintance of precisely twenty-five minutes:"—and Venetia glanced towards the or-molu clock on the mantelpiece as she uttered these last words.

"Miss Trelawney," said the baronet, to whose cheeks, before so pale, had rushed the crimson glow of mortification and bitter disappointment,—"you are not so much a stranger to me as you may imagine. 'Tis true that I have never spoken to you until this day: but I have seen you—I have admired you from a distance—and—and—I love you."

"But, unfortunately, my dear sir, I do not love you in return," answered Venetia, evidently resolved to treat the matter with a good-tempered raillery: "and therefore we must consider the topic at an end. Now, I am not angry with you—I shall not mention this silly proceeding elsewhere, so as to make a laughing-stock of you——"

"Oh! I thank you for this kind consideration on your part!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with bitterness of tone: then, instantaneously repenting of the unwarrantable ebullition of anger, he said, "But indeed I ought to thank you sincerely and unfeignedly, Miss Trelawney ——"

"You are reasonable, Sir Douglas, and will view the affair in its proper light," interrupted Venetia. "What complexion, then, does it assume? A gentleman of whom I know nothing, writes to me upon a matter of business—in fact, he announces to me that he has suddenly become my landlord. I cannot refuse to grant him the audience which he craves. He comes—he throws himself at my feet—and offers marriage. There are but two ways to treat him—either with anger, or with indulgence. I prefer the latter course, and I adopt it—in the hope that he will take his departure in a friendly manner and come near me no more. Now, Sir Douglas, have I made myself intelligible?"

"You have—too intelligible, Miss Trelawney," answered the baronet, not knowing how to act and scarcely what to say. "But am I to understand that you henceforth debar me the privilege of paying my respects to you occasionally?"

"Your visits cannot be agreeable to me after what has just passed," rejoined Venetia: "and I should also imagine that you yourself will feel no inclination to renew them."

"But is it impossible that I can ever make a favourable impression upon you?" inquired the baronet.

"Quite impossible, I can assure you," returned Venetia, laughing, as she leant against the mantelpiece—for she had risen from the sofa when her visitor threw himself upon his knees, and she had remained standing in order to discourage a prolongation of the interview.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon hesitated—and his confusion therefore became absolutely painful.

"You will order your doors to be closed against me?" he said, with a nervous quivering of the lip.

"I should hope that your good taste will render no such extreme measure necessary," answered Venetia, in a tone of dignified remonstrance.

"You are really very kind—very forbearing—very good-tempered," exclaimed Sir Douglas, now laughing in order to escape from the embarrassment and awkwardness of his position; "and it would be unpardonable on my side to do or say aught that may anger you. I shall therefore take my departure."

Thus speaking, the baronet made a low bow and quitted the room.

"I love her to desperation," he thought within himself, as he returned to his carriage, which was in attendance. "But how to possess her either as wife or mistress—aye, that is the question!"

The carriage was about to drive away, when a loud voice called out in a commanding tone for the coachman to stop—and the head of the redoubtable Captain Tash was immediately afterwards thrust in at the window.

"How are you, my dear Huntingdon? I saw you coming out of Acacia Cottage—and——"

"There, there—that's enough!" said the baronet impatiently. "I suppose you want eighteen-pence or half-a-crown—and here it is."

"By Jove, sir—but I want nothing of the kind!" exclaimed the Captain, affecting a tone and look of the deepest indignation.

"Well, it's the first time that I have ever known you *not* to want a trifle of the kind," said the baronet, laconically: then, as his glance happened to travel across the road, he beheld the Captain's man Robin standing bolt upright against a lamp-post, and apparently as motionless and rigid as the post itself. "By heaven! a thought strikes me!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, his countenance brightening up.

"What is it?" asked Tash.

"Send your man to me this evening, Captain, at nine o'clock," was the response, "and I will give him something to do that shall be well paid for. And now good-bye."

"Robin shall wait upon you punctually," answered Tash. "But when I think of it—if you do happen to have such a thing as a guinea about you——"

"Here it is!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, tossing the golden coin from the window. "And now tell the coachman to drive on."

The vehicle accordingly rolled away—and Captain Tash, having picked up the guinea, hastened back into the *Green Dragon* public-house, whither he was immediately followed by Robin, who sneaked in like a mongrel dog at the heels of its master.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KNIFE-GRINDER.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the same day on which the preceding incidents took place, that a knife-grinder entered the village of Richmond. He was wheeling his moveable shop before him, and proclaiming his avocation in a voice that was rather piercing and shrill than stentorian and hoarse. In person he was short, thin, and by no means strongly built; and as he was thoroughly begrimed with black, so that he could easily have passed himself off as a negro, had he chosen,—it becomes a matter of difficulty to extend our description to his countenance. As to the real colour of his hair and whiskers or the natural hue of his complexion, these are points on which we cannot possibly undertake to enlighten the reader,—inasmuch as his whole person, from head to foot, including his apparel, which was torn in many places, was as thickly incrusted with soot as if he had never come in contact with clean water since the first day of his knife-grinding avocation. In addition to this pursuit, however, he followed that of mending kettles and bellows, umbrellas and locks—or at all events he said so, and the public took his word for it.

Through Richmond did he slowly wend his way announcing his delectable presence by self-eulogistic vociferations of various kinds.

"Knives and scithors to grind! Here you air, ladies and genelmen, with the paytent double-milled double-distilled mechanism for giving knives so keen a hedge that the wery shadow will cut a slice out of a leg of mutton, and you're obleeged to hold 'em back for fear they should cut too big a slice at von time. Here you air, ladies, with the newly-inwented just diskivered machinery for grinding scithors—making 'em so sharp that they'd cut anything but love asunder in the twinkling of a hi. Knives and scithors to grind, O!"

Then stopping short, the soot-begrimed gentleman set his much-vaunted machinery going by the action of his foot; and the whirr of the wheels mingled with the jagging, grating noise of a piece of iron held tight against the grindstone, whence myriads of sparks flew about in every direction.

"Knives and scithors to grind, O!" again vociferates this indefatigable person. "Surely every von must have a knife that's blunt or a pair of scithors that wants a hedge. If you ha'n't, I shall think that there's no beef eaten and no needle-vork done in the pleasing willage of Richmond. Kittles to mend!—humberellers to mend! humberellers to mend! Come, now, what lady hasn't got a sarsepan or a kittle that wants a dooring? This is the shop for the paytent solder Locks to mend—locks to mend!—keys to fit—keys to fit! Knives and scithors to grind, O!—humberellers to mend!"

It did not however seem that the knife-grinder's eloquence produced any grand or startling effect: for he had by this time passed half through Richmond without obtaining a single proof of patronage. Happening to halt in the immediate vicinage of Mrs. Owen's house, he seated himself on the bank which was shaded by that very clump of trees wherein Daniel the Hangman had been concealed on the preceding evening.

Lighting his pipe by means of the fire which he carried in an iron brazier slung to his perambulating mechanism, the knife-grinder smoked with great apparent comfort to himself, despite the slackness of business; and as he lay lounging on the bank, he surveyed Mrs. Owen's house with the air of a man who could enjoy the view of an imposing mansion without at all envying the inmates.

But he had not smoked out his first pipe when he heard a voice exclaim, "Hallos! you knife-grinder and locksmith there!—what a lazy fellow it is!"

"Not at all lazy, when I've got anything to do," said the soot-begrimed individual, as he rose deliberately to his feet. "Now, then—who wants me?"

"I do," said the voice which had previously spoken: and in a few moments a footman in a handsome livery emerged from behind the clump of trees.

"At your service, sir," exclaimed the knife-grinder. "There isn't a thing I can't do to perfection in my bisness——"

"Talking included, I suppose," said the footman.

"I don't talk when I'm paid to hold my tongue, at all events," replied the knife-grinder.

The livery-servant looked him hard in the face, with the evident object of ascertaining if there were anything significant in these words: then, being probably unable to penetrate through such a coat of grime in order to read the expression of the man's countenance, he said, "How do you mean that you don't talk when you're paid to hold your tongue?"

"I mean just what I say — and I hope I've given no offence," answered the knife-grinder.

"Oh! none at all, my man," exclaimed the footman. "I suppose, then, that if you had a job given you here or hereabouts, you wouldn't go blabbing of it in the ale-house or tap-room to-night."

"Lord bless ye, I'm accustomed to them sorts of jobs," said the knife-grinder.

"What sorts of jobs?" demanded the livery-servant, sharply. "I didn't mention any in particular——"

"I know you didn't," said the sooty individual: "but what I meant was that I sometimes do things for genelmen's servants which it don't do to talk about—such as altering the key of one lock to fit another——"

"There—that's enough—and don't speak so loud," interrupted the livery-servant, glancing over his shoulder towards the mansion with the furtive keenness of one who wishes to assure himself that he is not overheard. "I see you are a decent fellow in your way. Where do you come from to-day?"

"From London, master," was the response; "and I'm off into the country as far away as I can go, cos vy——but that don't matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself.

"Ah! I see," said the footman, with a sly expression of countenance; "something you've done up yonder that makes it too hot—eh?"

"Well, I s'pose you ain't far off from the truth," answered the knife-grinder, laughing. "But come—won't you stand a drop of beer after all this long chat?"

"I'll stand a drop of beer and a guinea into the bargain if you'll first do what I want," said the domestic.

"A guinea!" ejaculated the knife-grinder, in a tone of joy and incredulity. "But what's the use of making a fool of a poor devil like me, that hasn't earnt a blessed ha'penny all day long?"

"You shall soon see whether I want to make a fool of you or not," rejoined the footman, displaying a golden coin for a moment from his waistcoat-pocket. "But, in plain terms, can you really and truly alter a key so as to fit a lock to which it doesn't properly belong?"

"I tell ye what it is," answered the knife-grinder, in a low tone and with a sooty look of mysteriousness, —"it often happens that I'm axed by genelmen's servants to do this sort of thing—and it's a very singular fact, but I've always noticed that wherever I *have* altered a key, the house has invariably been robbed in a most unaccountable manner a few days or weeks arterwards—and what is more, the thieves have never been diskivered."

"Ah! I see," observed the footman, with a semi-smile of deep significancy. "But how long does it take you to alter a key in this manner?"

"There's two answers to that question," said the knife-grinder. "Suppose you give me a common key, and order me to fit it to open all common locks: then I saws and files it away till I makes it a *skeleton*, as we calls it."

"Well, that's one answer!" observed the footman. "Now for the other."

"Suppose you give me two keys and tell me to make *one* just like the *other*," continued the knife-

grinder,—"this work may take a little longer time. But I could do either in an hour, generally speaking."

"That will do. Now wheel your rattle-trap out of the road, behind these trees, and wait till I come back."

Having thus spoken, John the footman hastened back into the house; and in a few minutes he returned with an umbrella and a couple of pairs of scissors in his hands.

"There's our cook's old cotton umbrella which she wants mended," he said; "and these scissors belong to the housemaid and tiring-woman. You'll do them nicely, of course? But these keys," added the footman," in a lower tone, as he produced the articles named, "are mine — and this old rusty one, must be made exactly like that new bright one."

"All right—and no questions axed," returned the knife-grinder. "Come back in three-quarters of an hour, and everything shall be done."

John the footman accordingly hurried back into the house; and the knife-grinder fell to work in the field, behind the clump of trees, where he had wheeled his machine. He first ground the scissors, whistling all the time in a free and easy fashion, as if perfectly at ease within himself, despite the little trouble to which he had alluded as the cause of a somewhat precipitate flight from London. Having disposed of the scissors, he sate down and cobbled up the umbrella: and then he examined the keys. They were both small, but of the same size, although utterly dissimilar in respect to the wards; and as the knife-grinder examined the bright key, he muttered to himself, "Ah! this belongs to a patent lock—and a pretty intricate thing it is, too! But I dare say I can manage the business."

Then, opening a drawer which fitted into the frame-work of his machine, he carefully examined a number of keys contained therein. Those keys were all sorts, shapes, fashions, and sizes; and it seemed impossible that there could be in existence a lock which at least some of them would not open. At length the knife-grinder found amongst the collection, a key which exactly corresponded with the bright one which the footman had left with him. As for the old rusty key also placed in his hands by the livery-servant, he tossed it amongst the others in the drawer, which he then shut and carefully fastened.

Having thus easily performed his work, he smoked his pipe, until the three quarters of an hour had elapsed—when John re-appeared from Mrs. Owen's mansion.

"Well, have you finished?" he inquired anxiously.

"If I hadn't, I should still be at work," answered the knife-grinder. "Here's the humberel-ler—and here's the scithors——"

"But the keys?" demanded John, with an impatience which he could not subdue.

"Here," returned the knife-grinder. "And now I'll be bound you can't tell me which is the new 'un and which is the old 'un?"

"No—may I be hanged if I can!" exclaimed the livery-servant, comparing the two keys with mingled admiration and surprise. "By jingo! you're a clever fellow and a quick workman: why, one would think it must have taken pretty nearly all the time to polish that cursed old rusty key that I gave you—to say nothing about the altering of all the wards."

"You see I'm accustomed to it," observed the knife-grinder, carelessly.

"But I should think you yourself can hardly tell which of these keys was the rusty one," said John.

"I should be a fool if I couldn't diskiver my own work," replied the man bluntly. "But come, tip us the rhino, I want to be off and get a glass of ale, for this is cursed dry work."

"Well, I won't keep you, my good fellow," said John. "There's the guinea I promised, and here's half-a-crown to pay for the other things, and to get yourself some ale with."

"Thank'ee, kindly, master. And now just tell us where they draw a good drop of beer?"

"Why, the best is at the *King's Arms*, yonder." returned the footman. "Good evening."

"Good evening, master," said the knife-grinder: and catching up the handles of his barrow-like machine, he trundled it back into the road whistling blithely as he went along.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TAP-ROOM.

An hour afterwards—that is to say, at about nine o'clock in the evening—John, the footman, repaired to the *King's Arms* ale-house. As he passed the bar, he nodded to the landlord with the familiarity of a well-known frequenter of the house; and he was about to enter the tap-room, when a thought struck him, and he stopped short.

"Has a knife-grinding fellow been here this evening?" he inquired of the host, who was a stout, jolly-looking man, with a honest countenance, and a rubicund complexion.

"Yes—about two hours back, I should think it must be," was the answer. "He only took a glass of ale and went off. But why do you ask?"

"Oh! merely because I wanted the fellow to do some jobs for me; and as he passed along the road just now I asked him where he was going, and he said to the *King's Arms*. But it's no matter—I suppose he's off on the tramp again. Is any one in the tap-room?"

"Two persons, I think," answered the landlord. "And one of 'em inquired if you'd been in this evening. I fancy he's the same that I've seen here before in your company."

"Ah! I expected some one—it's all right—an acquaintance of mine," observed John, affecting a careless manner. "Who's the other?"

"I don't know—a country-looking fellow," was the reply. "What shall I bring you in?"

"Ale—a pint of your best," returned John; and having thus given his orders, he passed on, and entered the tap-room.

As the landlord had stated, he found two persons there. One was his friend Daniel, the hangman, the other was an individual in a peasant's garb, with a matted shock of light hair, a florid complexion, and a peculiarly stolid look. His age seemed to be midway between thirty and forty; and from his general appearance he was evidently a farm-labourer. He sate in a corner of the room, and was busily engaged in discussing a supper of bread and cheese, which he seasoned

with onions and washed down with copious draughts of ale.

The Hangman was dressed as we have already described him in a previous chapter. His shabby shooting jacket—his corduroy breeches — his leathern gaiters—his lace-up boots—and his blue cotton neckerchief, all helped to complete the ruffianism of his appearance: while his ghastly countenance and glaring eyes gave him a hideous and spectral air, reminding one of the gholes, or devourers of corpses, that so often figure in oriental tales.

"Well, you see I'm punctual," he said, as John the footman entered the tap-room. "I've been here this quarter of an hour——"

"And I'm as punctual as I could be, old fellow," replied the servant. "But what news?"

"Oh! all right," was the response: and the Hangman glanced significantly towards the country bumpkin as much as to imply that they must not speak too openly and too plainly before a third party.

"So it came off, then, last night?" said the livery-servant.

"Yes—right as a trivet," answered the Hangman.

"Just as you expected, Dan'el?"

"Just as I expected."

And the two exchanged looks of deep meaning.

The countryman, having by this time disposed of his meal and drained the pewter-pot, seated himself in the corner for a nap; and the Hangman proceeded to light his pipe—an example that was followed by the footman.

"The young ladies all leave to-morrow," observed the latter, after a pause: "and missus will be alone in the house—that is, with me and the servant-gals."

"Ah! they leave to-morrow, do they?" said the Hangman, as he puffed his pipe: but through the faint blue wreaths of smoke he exchanged another significant look with his companion.

"They take their departure to-morrow morning," continued the latter: then, glancing towards the countryman and perceiving that his eyes were shut, the footman drew a key from his pocket and showed it to the Hangman.

"Good!" muttered this individual, his countenance expressing great satisfaction.

"I got from a rascal of a travelling tinker or knife-grinder," said John, in a low tone, as he returned the key to his pocket. "The fellow is clever at his business——"

Now the country bumpkin in the corner began to snore: and both the Hangman and the livery-servant continued to smoke in silence for a few minutes.

"He's fast asleep," at length observed Daniel, in an under tone.

"Fast as a church," replied the footman. "Come, hand me over my regulars, old fellow—for I suppose you've got the golden boys about your precious person."

"Here's ten guineas—and ten you've had in advance, makes up twenty for your regulars in last night's job," said the Hangman, as he counted down the coin.

"Thank'ee. And so the thing went off as comfortable—eh?" inquired the footman, and he dropt the ten guineas into his waistcoat pocket.

"Nothing could be better. The Prince and the Marquis didn't bluster or ride rusty a bit," continued the Hangman. "They submitted to circumstances in a way very creditable to themselves," he added, with a low chuckling laugh: "and I'll stake my existence that they couldn't suspect where they were taken to. But wasn't it a rum lark altogether?"

"From what you told me beforehand about it, I should say it was," returned the footman. "But tell us all the particulars, Daniel."

"Not now—another time," answered the Hangman. "We've got something else to talk about at present. I suppose that fellow's really asleep?" he added glancing towards the countryman in the corner.

"If he isn't, he shams snoring uncommon well," replied John. "But of course he is."

"Well then, what about this little business over the way?" asked the Hangman. "You say that all your young missusses are going off to-morrow—and you've got a duplicate key?"

"Just so. It was the luckiest chance in the world that sent the knife-grinding fellow through Richmond to-day," continued the footman: "for I was thinking at the moment how the devil I should manage it, when I heard the rascal bawling out all kinds of nonsense about locks to mend and keys to fit."

"And you happened to have *the* key in your hand at the time, I suppose?" observed the Hangman.

"Exactly so. You recollect, when I first hinted at the little affair," proceeded John, "I told you that every now and then there's a regular clean out of the great iron safe where the plate is kept—and while its being cleaned and counted up I have the key in my hands: but the moment the plate's put back again, I have to give up the key to missus again. She keeps a devilish sharp look-out, I can tell you!"

"So I suppose—with such a valuable lot of plate in her possession," observed the Hangman. "Of course its all got the royal arms and so on upon it?"

"Every spoon, knife, fork, dish, salver, and pepper-box," responded the footman. "By jingo! Dan'el, won't there be work for old Jeremy's melting-pot?"

"I hope so," rejoined the Hangman. "And won't there be a precious rumpus, too, when it's missed from the iron safe! Suppose the knife-grinding fellow that made the key, should hear of it—don't you think he'll come forward and give evidence in the matter?"

"I shouldn't have trusted him to make the key if I hadn't found out beforehand that he was all right," answered John. "Ah! didn't I pump him nicely? He let out that he was wanted in London for something queer that he'd done—and he's off into the country as far away as he can go. I'm sure it's quite safe with him, in fact."

"Well, you're not a fool, John—and you wasn't born yesterday," observed the Hangman: then, after a pause, he said, "And now, when is it to be done?"

"Name your own time," responded the footman. "But recollect that this job is betwixt you and me alone, and that nobody else is to have a finger in the pie. It will make our fortunes, Dan'el."

"Yes—it won't be a bad haul for our nets," observed the Hangman, in a tone of satisfaction. "The worst of it is that we shall be so completely at old Jeremy's mercy. But this is a thing we must

see too: and, by all the fiends! I'll slit the ancient villain's windpipe if he don't treat us well in the matter."

"If you speak so loud you'll awake that bumpkin in the corner there," said John, pointing with his pipe towards the countryman.

"Ah! I forgot him," observed the Hangman. "But those fellows sleep like tops. Well, now we've to settle the night for this little business of our'n—and then I shall be off."

"You're going back to London to-night, Dan'el?" said the footman, interrogatively.

"To be sure I am—or else how the devil could I be at business to-morrow morning at seven o'clock?" demanded the Hangman.

"Ah! that barbering dodge of your's is a capital blind!" observed John, with a subdued chuckle. "But you've got such a precious agreeable and pleasant look, that I wonder half your customers ain't afraid to trust their faces to your razor. There's such a short distance between the chin and the throat——"

"Come, none of your chaffing," growled the Hangman, sulkily. "We didn't make ourselves: if we did, may be I should have put a handsomer head on my body."

"And then you wouldn't have done for the office of Jack Ketch," rejoined the livery-servant, whom the landlord's strong ale had enlivened into a bantering mood. "But what with the joint avocations of Public Executioner and Cheap Barber, my friend Dan'el Coffin is the most important personage in Fleet Lane, Farringdon Street, London."

"I say, old fellow," exclaimed the Hangman, his countenance becoming terribly dark and his eyes glaring with luminous fires,—"do you want me to flatten this pewter pot on your skull? Because if you do, you're going just the right way to provoke me to it. What the devil has come upon you all of a sudden?"

"Why, can't you stand a joke, Dan'el," said the livery-servant. "I'm sure I didn't mean to offend you——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Hangman, suffering himself to be appeased. "But I'm not of the liveliest temper in the world, you know," he added, with a ghastly attempt at a smile; "and I can't understand a jest. Now, then—once more, what night is it to be?"

"Suppose we say next Sunday night," observed John, after a few minutes' consideration. "The old lady never has any company of a Sunday evening, and always goes to bed early."

"Let it be Sunday evening, then," said Jack Ketch: "and in the meantime I'll see old Jeremy and whisper to him what's in the wind."

"Do so," rejoined the footman. "At midnight punctually you'll——"

The remainder of the sentence was breathed in the lowest tone to the Hangman's ear.

"Good! The appointment shall be kept to a moment," replied the latter worthy: then, having emptied his pewter pot, he rose to take his departure.

John the the footman likewise tossed off the remainder of his ale; and the two friends separated, leaving the country bumpkin still snoring in the corner of the tap-room.

CHAPTER XV.

OUTRAGE AND MYSTERY.

It was on this same Tuesday evening of which we have just been writing, that an incident occurred in the neighbourhood of Canterbury, which we must pause to chronicle in its proper place.

The sun had set—the delicious softness and calmness of twilight was upon the scene — the flowers were closing up their buds, as if wearied of expending their fragrance on a thankless air—and the twitter of the birds became fainter in the trees.

The charming Louisa was seated in that bower where we last beheld her in company with the handsome and adoring Jocelyn Loftus. She was alone—and pensive: but her pensiveness was not imbued with affliction—scarcely with sorrow. It was rather the stagnant thought of love: for she had been pondering the whole day, and was pondering now, upon the image of the young man to whom she had given her heart.

On the preceding evening he had told her that he must leave Canterbury for a few days—perhaps not more than three: but at all events, he had positively assured her that his absence would not extend beyond a week at the very outside. His contemplated marriage with the charming maiden, by involving a change of position, rendered it necessary for him to repair to London to look into his affairs: and Louisa had given him a letter which he undertook to deliver in person to Clara in Stratton Street. He was naturally anxious to avail himself of this opportunity of paying his respects to the sister of his beloved one; and the reader may rest assured that Louisa had not only written a very long letter, but had also charged him with a thousand fond messages for Clara.

Jocelyn, who had been residing for many weeks at an hotel in Canterbury, took his departure by the first coach on the Tuesday morning, so that he might reach London at an early hour in the evening, and thus have time to write letters to those persons whom he intended to call upon next day. For he was really and naturally most anxious to dispose of his business with all possible promptitude, in order to return the sooner to Canterbury and to the sweet society of her whom he loved with such unfeigned devotion.

Louisa was therefore now alone,—alone, at the delicious twilight hour, in the umbrageous arbour. She thought of everything that Jocelyn had said to her on the preceding evening,—how he had implored her to be happy during his temporary absence—how he had affectionately kissed away her tears, whispering the tenderest vows and protestations the while. She thought also that she was bound to rejoice at this visit which he was paying to London, inasmuch as it would furnish the opportunity of rendering him acquainted with her sister, and also of ascertaining that she was both well and happy. And then, too, this journey to the metropolis was undertaken for the purpose of settling his affairs previously to the arrangements for that bridal ceremony which was to make him indissolubly her own: and therefore, as she reviewed all these circumstances, Louisa could not well experience affliction at her lover's absence.

The sun had set some time—the twilight had merged into the deepening obscurity of the hour—and still Louisa remained in the arbour. The profound tranquillity which prevailed was congenial to her feelings;—and in a sort of dreamy reverie she sate pondering upon the topic so dear to gentle maidens who truly and fondly love.

She had left her aunt sleeping in her chamber, with the servant-girl Mary watching by her side; and the young lady knew that if her afflicted relative awoke, she would receive the kindest care from that faithful domestic. Louisa was not therefore in haste to quit the scene of deep shade and profound silence where she could ponder, with such abstraction of sentiment, upon her cherished love.

It was near ten o'clock; and Louisa was at last thinking of returning into the cottage, when she was startled by a noise like that of some one forcing a way through the hedge surrounding the garden. She listened with suspended breath—and all was still. Then, as the influence of that sudden alarm subsided, she rose from the bench in the arbour and was hastening towards the cottage, when two ruffians sprang forth from the dense shade of the fruit-trees. A hand that was instantaneously placed upon her mouth stifled the faint shriek which had risen to her lips: and at the same moment a rough voice menaced her with terrible things if she dared to create an alarm.

But these threats were needless: for the poor girl was now in a fainting condition—and she would have fallen to the ground had not the arms of the two ruffians supported her. In this state was she borne to a gap which had been made in the hedge near the arbour: and, being carried through the opening, she was conveyed to a vehicle resembling a gipsy's van, and which was waiting at a little distance. Into this she was thrust, though not violently; and the door was closed upon her, leaving her in utter darkness.

"Cheer up, young lass—you've nothing to be terrified at," said a female voice, which, by its tones, was evidently that of an old woman.

"Who are you?—what does this mean?" inquired Louisa, partially recovering herself, but scarcely able to believe that what was passing could be otherwise than a dream.

"I musn't answer no questions," was the reply, given in the same harsh voice as before, and in a coarse, vulgar tone. "But you ain't a-going to be killed—so don't be afeard on that score.

Louisa pressed her hands to her brow to steady her whirling thoughts. She was seated upon a bench in the vehicle, entombed in the profoundest darkness, and with some old hag as her companion. The vehicle itself was now moving on at a rapid rate. But whither was it going?—what destiny was in reserve for her? Surely she must be the victim of some terrible mistake? Who could possibly have any interest or motive in perpetrating this outrage upon her?

"You must have captured the wrong person?" she said at length, but in a tone of the most poignant anguish. "Tell me—speak—whom were you instructed to take prisoner?"

"My sons did it, young lass," was the response, the harsh tones of the old woman's voice grating through the darkness of the vehicle. "They know all about it—and if your name's Louisa Stanley, there's no mistake in the business whatsomever."

An exclamation of despair burst from the young lady's lips—and the sense of her complete helplessness struck upon her with an effect that was almost maddening. Good heavens! what was to become of her aunt?—what would the poor maid-servant think? The idea was distraction! And then, if she were to be kept a prisoner for any length of time—if Jocelyn were to return and find her absent—or if he wrote and his letters remained unanswered——O God! these reflections, as they swept through Louisa's brain, were fraught with the excruciations of ten thousand agonies!

The vehicle had proceeded about twenty minutes, when the wheels began to rattle over the pavement of a street: and Louisa was thus made aware that it was entering Canterbury—no doubt at some point to reach which it had taken a circuitous route, inasmuch as the distance between the cottage and the nearest suburb might have been accomplished in a quarter of the interval. In a few more minutes it stopped; and the old woman said in a stern voice, "Now, young lass, you must let me put a hood over your head ——"

And while thus speaking, she stretched out her arms towards Louisa. But the instant the young maiden experienced the contact of fingers that felt cold, sharp, and skinny as the claws of some horrible animal, her already overwrought feelings and excited imagination conjured up the most appalling ideas;—and believing that she was cooped up in the van with a fearful—perhaps unearthly—object, she sought to find vent for her frenzied terrors in a wild, thrilling scream. But it died upon her lips—her emotions suddenly overpowered her—and she fell back in the vehicle, deprived of all consciousness.

When Louisa Stanley awoke again, she found herself lying upon a bed, with a serious-looking elderly female standing by her side

"Where am I?" demanded the agitated girl, a host of painful reminiscences crowding in upon her mind: and before a syllable of response could be given by her to whom the question was addressed, Louisa's eyes swept with the speed of lightning round the room, as if she sought, in the nervous excitement of her terror, to embrace every object at a glance.

A candle, placed upon a toilette-table, lighted the chamber, which was small but well furnished; and the walls appeared to be covered with a thick baise instead of either wainscotting or paper. The bed on which Louisa found herself reclining, was hung with heavy draperies, now drawn aside no doubt for the purpose of affording her as much air as possible: and equally massive curtains at the end of the apartment facing the couch, showed where the window was situated.

"Where am I?" she had demanded, half starting from the bed as this rapid survey was followed by the conviction that it was no dream from which she had just awakened, but that she had really been snatched away from her home and borne to a strange place.

"Tranquillise yourself, young lady," said the female, in a voice the mildness of which contrasted strongly with the harsh tones of the hag whose touch had so frightened the maiden in the gipsy van.

"But where am I?—and by whose command am I brought hither?" exclaimed Louisa, springing from the couch.

"I cannot answer your questions, Miss," returned

the woman. "All I can say is, that you have nothing to apprehend either on your own account or that of any person dwelling at your cottage."

"What am I to understand by the latter portion of your remarks?" demanded Louisa, with feverish —almost delirious impatience.

"I mean that some reasonable excuse has been made for your absence from home," was the reply. "A trusty person has delivered such a message to the servant at the cottage."

"Then, great heaven! is my absence to be long?—is my captivity to last for days—or weeks—or——"

And horrified at the prospect which her terrors were shadowing forth, the unhappy girl stopped short and burst into tears.

"I must again observe, Miss," said the woman, "that I dare not answer any queries which you may put to me. But I implore you to tranquillise your feelings——"

"Oh! what will become of me?—for what doom am I reserved?" exclaimed Louisa, in a voice broken by sobs that half suffocated her: and as she thus gave vent to her bitter, bitter affliction, she wrung her hands in despair.

The female said nothing—but stood back a few paces and gazed with cold and impassive look upon that spectacle of woe which would have touched any heart that was not inured to such scenes. Perhaps she thought that torrents of tears would afford relief to the agonised maiden: and so she let her weep on. And if this were her calculation, she was not deceived in it: for those pearly floods and those suffocating sobs proved a vent for the surcharged violence, though not for the torturing keenness, of Louisa's mental agony;—and becoming more composed outwardly she again addressed [illegible] kinds of [illegible] to the matron.

"I am here to obey your orders, Miss, in everything that becomes an attendant," was the response; "but not to be garrulous or communicative. If you need refreshments, I will procure them immediately: every luxury is at your disposal. If you desire to seek the bed which is there ready for you, I will assist you in your night-toilette. And as it is growing late, I think you would do well to adopt my suggestion. At all events, you may command me as you choose—and if you wish to be alone, I will leave you."

"Yes—leave me—I would be alone!" answered Louisa, vague thoughts and undefined hopes of escape naturally springing up in her mind.

An imperceptible smile for a moment moved the lips of the female, as if she penetrated the unhappy girl's design and knew how vain it was: but merely wishing her a cold "Good night," she quitted the room.

It appeared by the sound as if *two* doors closed behind the woman: but whether this were fancy or not on Louisa's part, it assuredly was no delusion when the noise of a key turning in the lock and a bolt being drawn on the outside, fell upon her ear.

"O heaven! what will become of me?" cried the poor girl, before whom those ominous sounds seemed to conjure up the blank darkness of despair: but the next instant she fell upon her knees —and from the depths of her stricken soul arose a voiceless yet fervid cry to Him who sits above the stars and sees and hears everything that takes place upon earth.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MARQUIS OF LEVESON.

THE day following the incidents just recorded was Wednesday; and the scene again shifts from Canterbury to London.

The Marquis of Leveson rose at an earlier hour than usual. His favourite and faithful valet, Stephen Brockman, saw that his lordship was labouring under a certain amount of nervous excitement: but the dependant, as discreet as he was devoted, ventured not the slightest allusion to the circumstance. He knew full well that if the Marquis intended to make him a confidant in anything which had transpired or was anticipated, his lordship would not require to be drawn out, but would speak of his own accord: whereas, on the other hand, if the nobleman purposed to keep his own counsel, he would assuredly do so.

The toilette of the Marquis of Leveson was completed. The whiskers were artistically dyed—the false teeth, which had lain all night in rose-water, were fitted in—the wig looked as well as a natural head of hair—and there was not a crease in the elegantly fashioned garments. A diamond pin shone on the snowy shirt-frill—a gold chain of exquisite workmanship festooned over the morning waistcoat—and a couple of rings, the value of either of which would have made any mechanic or artizan happy for the rest of his life, glittered on the nobleman's right hand.

"Now, Brockman," began the Marquis of Leveson, as he took a last survey of himself in the full-length mirror, or psyche,—"I have some particular instructions to give you."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet, perceiving that the ice was about to be broken.

"In the first place I intend to remain at home the whole day," continued the Marquis; "and I shall sit in the Crimson Drawing-Room. Whoever calls, no matter what the appearance of the visitor may be, let him or her be immediately shown up."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet.

"You know the two porcelain vases, standing on either side of the fire-place? Well—let a loaded pistol be placed in each, with the butt uppermost, so that they may be ready to the hand if need be."

"Two loaded pistols, my lord!" echoed the valet, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes—two loaded pistols, Brockman," repeated the Marquis, in a tone of authority: "and take care that they *are* loaded. But you need labour under no apprehension on my account: I am not going to fight a duel. The precaution is merely taken because the visitor whom I expect may prove an insolent one."

"Your lordship's commands shall be obeyed," answered the valet.

"And you may put a nosegay in each vase, Brockman," continued the Marquis, "so as to hide the pistols. But these are not all the instructions which I have to give you. I have chosen the Crimson Drawing-Room because it has two bells—one ringing in the servants' hall, and the other in the passage leading to your own apartment."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet.

"Well," resumed the nobleman, "you must now pay particular attention to the instructions I am

about to give. The moment a visitor arrives, you will hasten to your own apartment and pull down the window-blind. But you will on no account quit the room until I send word that you can do so. On the contrary, you will remain there to listen attentively for the bell in the passage: and the moment you hear it ring *once*, you will draw up the blind. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my lord," was the reply.

"But if you should hear the bell ring *twice*, Brockman," continued the Marquis, "you will, at the second peal, hasten down to the Crimson Drawing-Room, where I shall in that case need your presence."

"Very good, my lord," answered the valet. "Has your lordship any farther instructions?" he inquired, wondering whether he was to receive an explanation of the extraordinary proceedings and precautions just detailed by his noble master.

"Nothing more, Brockman," was the response. "I am now going straight to the Crimson Drawing-Room, where you can order breakfast to be served up."

The valet bowed and withdrew, considerably disappointed at being thus left in the dark relative to the affair now in progress. The moment the door closed behind him the Marquis opened a drawer and took out several Bank-notes to the value of two thousand guineas. Having carefully copied the numbers of the notes upon a slip of paper, which he locked up in the drawer, he placed the notes themselves in his waistcoat pocket, and then descended the stairs to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

This apartment, which borrowed its distinctive epithet from the hue of the draperies and the cushions of the chairs and sofas, was furnished with the most luxurious splendour. It was very lofty—and the ceiling was painted to represent the sky at the hour of sunrise, in order that the rosy tints which the artist was thus enabled to introduce should match the crimson paper on the walls and the colour of the furniture's rich trappings. The mirrors in this superb apartment were four in number and of enormous size. Magnificent porcelain vases were filled with flowers that rendered the atmosphere fragrant; and the light, softened and subdued by the hangings at the windows, was of that auroral tint which the sun-beams borrow when passing through bowers of full-blown, blushing roses.

There were two doors to the Crimson Drawing-Room—one opening from the landing, and therefore serving as the usual means of ingress and egress; and the other, at the opposite side of the apartment, leading into a suite of chambers to which the dependants of the household generally had no access. The key of the door thus communicating with that secret range of rooms, was always in the possession of the Marquis; and when those rooms required cleaning and dusting, the housekeeper and Stephen Brockman were exclusively entrusted with that duty. It was of this suite that a rumour existed to the effect notified at the commencement of our narrative: namely, that they contained pictures and statues of such a character as to excite maddening desires even in the breast of the sternest anchorite or the coldest virgin.

But to resume our tale. The Marquis of Leveson seated himself in the Crimson Drawing Room, and partook of the chocolate that was served up. While thus lingering over his breakfast, he reviewed all the precautions he had been adopting. Contrary to his habit upon first rising in the morning, he had dressed himself for the day, because he did not know how soon his expected visitor might come, or how late he might be kept waiting for the arrival. He had ordered pistols to be placed ready at hand in case of need: and he had devised the means of summoning his valet, if his presence should be wanted. He had numbered the Bank-notes; and the drawing up of the blind in Brockman's apartment was also a portion of the ramified preparations he had made.

Pleased with his review of these arrangements, the Marquis finished his breakfast, and rang the servants' bell for the footman to remove the silver tray. The domestic who answered the summons brought in some letters which had just arrived by the twopenny post; and the nobleman proceeded to examine them with the leisurely ease of one who is pretty well assured that his circumstances in life are a guarantee against the arrival of any disagreeable correspondence.

The first letter which he opened, ran as follows:—

"*Tuesday evening, September 17th*, 1814.

"Start not, my dear uncle, when you see my handwriting and learn that I am once more in London. I returned on Sunday evening, but am preserving the strictest *incognita*, for reasons which you can too well divine. I propose calling upon you to-morrow (Wednesday) at about twelve o'clock. Pray be at home—and, what is more, contrive to be disengaged and alone, as I wish to speak to you on matters of the greatest importance.

"Your affectionate niece,
"ERNESTINA DYSART."

"Poor Ernestina!" said the Marquis to himself, as he laid down the letter. "She is the only one of the whole family that I ever loved. But then, while yet a mere girl—and before that unfortunate marriage into which she was inveigled—she nursed me during my long and serious illness——Poor Ernestina! Yes—I will see her—to be sure I will see her!"

And the Marquis rose to ring the servants' bell, in order to give orders that his niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart, should be admitted when she called at mid-day: but suddenly recollecting that he had already issued instructions to the effect that every one, no matter who it was, should be shown up into his presence, he returned to his seat.

Resuming the examination of his letters, he opened the second one on the pile which the footman had placed before him; and he read its contents as follows:—

"*Tuesday evening, September 17th.*

"My lord,

"Much as I deplore the necessity of holding personal communication with your lordship, circumstances nevertheless compel me to request an interview in the course of to-morrow. I shall therefore wait upon your lordship at about one o'clock.

"I have the honour to remain, my lord
"Your lordship's obedient servant and nephew,
"ALGERNON CAVENDISH."

"The insolent boy!" ejaculated the Marquis, tossing the letter indignantly upon the table. "He disowns his relative—and then requests an interview! And doubtless, if the world knew all, he would be termed high spirited—and so forth!

But I will see him—yes—I will see him: for I am curious to know what he can possibly want with me. By the bye, how strange is this coincidence—the brother and the sister both coming to me on the same day—both writing at the same time—and yet not in concert! No—for I dare say that Algernon and Ernestina have not met for some time past."

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson took up a third letter; and instantly recognising the handwriting of the address, he opened it and read the following lines:—

"13, *Stratton Street, Piccadilly,*
"*September* 17*th*, 1814.

"Dear Lord Leveson,

"I have a particular favour to request of you, which I am certain you will grant. But I do not like to commit it to paper; and therefore I will do myself the pleasure of calling at Leveson House to-morrow (Wednesday, the 18th) at about three o'clock. Do be at home, there's a dear good soul.

"Your sincere friend,
"ELIZABETH BATHURST."

"Upon my honour! methinks I have done well to remain at home the whole day," murmured his lordship to himself. "What a troop of visitors! And I suppose that my friend Miss Bathurst wants to borrow some more money of me. Borrow, indeed! As if she would ever repay me! Why, it is but six weeks or so, since I lent her a thousand pounds. It is very clear that she is not coming for the purpose of returning it—otherwise she would not intimate that she has a request to proffer. Ah! it is very fortunate for such ladies as Miss Bathurst that there are such men as the Marquis of Leveson in the world."

The current of the nobleman's musings was turned into another channel, when, on taking up the fourth letter, he recognised the handwriting of Mrs. Owen. The epistle contained the following words:—

"*Richmond, Tuesday evening, Sept.* 17*th.*

"My dear Leveson,

"To-morrow morning I shall be in London with the girls. All is settled—and they are to take their departure at once. I have received a letter from our gracious Queen to that effect. They have all four been well tutored by me: and I am certain that not even the members of the famous Secret Police of Paris, nor yet the most astute brethren of the Order of Jesuits, could be better prepared to play their part than are my daughters. I shall take them to-morrow as far as Woolwich and see them embark: and then I shall return at once, passing through London on my way homeward. I therefore propose to call upon you between four and five to-morrow afternoon, as I wish to have a few words with you in private.

"Faithfully your's,
"ANNE OWEN."

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed the Marquis aloud. "Four appointments made for to-day, in addition to the one which had induced me to remain at home! It is scarcely credible—and if such a string of coincidences occurred in a romance or novel, the reader would cry out against such an improbability. Well, at all events my day will be thoroughly occupied! But if *the* visitor,—the visitor of visitors, as I may call him or her, whichever it is to be, who will call with the pocket-book and to receive the two thousand guineas,—if *this* visitor, I say, arrives while either of the others happens to be with me, I must at once get rid of the latter, be it niece or nephew—Miss Bathurst or Mrs. Owen."

Having arrived at this determination, the Marquis of Leveson proceeded to examine the remaining letters: but their contents were not of a character to interest the reader.

Having run through his correspondence, the nobleman rose from his seat and advanced to one of the windows. On the opposite side of the street a beggar-man was posted. A wretched object, in truth, did he seem, with his garments in rags, a white handkerchief bound round his head as if he had sustained some injury, and a black patch over one eye.

But the Marquis, as he caught sight of that miserable-looking creature, only smiled significantly and turned away from the window.

CHAPTER XVII.

ERNESTINA AND ALGERNON.

PUNCTUALLY as the time-piece upon the mantel proclaimed the hour of noon, a hackney-coach stopped at Leveson House; and a lady, handsomely dressed, but closely veiled, alighted. On entering the hall of the mansion she threw back her veil, and revealed a countenance that was strikingly beautiful. Her age appeared to be about four-and-twenty; and a certain air of melancholy which gave a plaintive expression to her features, enhanced the tender interest that her style of loveliness was calculated to inspire.

The hall-porter instantaneously recognised this lady, and greeted her with the profoundest respect. A footman who was in attendance informed her, in answer to the inquiry which she made, that the Marquis was at home; and he at once conducted her to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart!" exclaimed the domestic, thus announcing the visitress as he flung open the door of the apartment.

"My dear niece, I am rejoiced to see you," said Lord Leveson, advancing to welcome her: then, kissing her affectionately upon the forehead, he conducted her to a seat, placing himself near her.

We have before observed that there seems in the human character to exist a necessity for loving something or somebody. The most selfish of scandal-mongering old women will love their cat: the most griping of misers may cherish an affection for a faithful dog;—and the most brutal ruffian oftimes is gentle and docile with his mistress. So it was with the Marquis of Leveson. Unprincipled and heartless as a voluptuary—selfish and egotistical to a degree with regard to his pleasures—and ready to sacrifice anybody or anything to the gratification of his sensualities,—this detestable nobleman entertained a truly paternal affection for his niece Ernestina.

Truly had he himself observed, in the musings which her letter had excited in his mind, that she was the only being he had ever loved. His wife he had never cared for: and without a tear had he followed her to the grave. He had no children—and he hated his nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish, who was his heir: all other relatives that he had, did he likewise hate or else feel indifferent about—with the exception of Algernon's sister, his niece Ernestina. He had loved her from her childhood and his affection was increased by the tender car-

with which she had nursed him during a long illness.

But still his love was of a peculiar character. She had married against his consent: indeed, she had eloped with the man who became her husband;—and the Marquis swore a deadly oath that he would never recognise the match—never speak to Mr. Dysart—never do anything for him. Nor could all his love for Ernestina induce him to alter his mind: so that for the last few years (since that fatal elopement and marriage) the lady had been to a considerable degree estranged from her uncle's society.

But now the niece and her noble relative have met again—and the latter has welcomed Ernestina kindly. He has kissed her brow—he has conducted her to a seat—he has placed himself near her—and he gazes upon her with mingled attention and interest. She has been married five years: during that period he has not beheld her often—and it is upwards of six months since he saw her last. She is still beautiful—touchingly, charmingly, fascinatingly beautiful: and he deplores in the profundities of his soul that such beauty should have been thrown away upon such a man as Paul Dysart.

It is not however because Ernestina's husband is a dissipated, reckless, good-for-nothing character,—nor because he is a gamester and a spendthrift,—nor because he is much older than the lady herself,—it is not for all these reasons that the Marquis of Leveson abhors the alliance which his niece has formed. But it is because Mr. Dysart is a man of broken fortunes—unconnected with any aristocratic family—in fact, a downright adventurer. The Marquis therefore considers that Ernestina has disgraced herself, beyond all reparation, by such a match; and though he now receives her

kindly, she knows full well that were she even to mention the name of her husband, her uncle would start up in a fury and overwhelm her with the bitterest reproaches.

"I am rejoiced to see you," repeated the Marquis of Leveson.

"I am rejoiced to see you also, my dear uncle," answered Ernestina, with a profound sigh. "You are in good health—you look well—and—and you are happy!"

"I wish that you were happy also, Ernestina," said the nobleman. "But if there be anything that I can do to lighten your afflictions—and so long as it is for *yourself* alone, mind——"

"Thank you, my dear uncle—thank you!" exclaimed Lady Ernestina Dysart, with a singular and enthusiastic fervour. "I told you in my brief note that I wished to speak to you upon a matter of importance—and it is only to beseech a favour at your hands."

"Name it, niece—name it," said the Marquis, hurriedly. "But not a word upon a particular topic—not a syllable on behalf of a certain person——"

"No: it is only for myself that I am about to solicit this favour, my dear uncle," interrupted the lady, with a species of hysterical nervousness in her manner, and a painful excitement in her tone: then, with the evident trepidation and suspense of one who fears a refusal, she said, "The boon that I crave at your hands, is money!"

"I thought so!" ejaculated the Marquis, his lips quivering. "But if it be to bestow upon one who will waste it at the gaming-table—and leave you to want or embarrassment——"

"No, no—it shall not be disposed of thus!" exclaimed Ernestina, with impassioned violence. "But I can assure you, my dear uncle, it will relieve me—yes, *me*—from cruel difficulties——"

"Well, well—you shall have it, Ernestina," interrupted the Marquis, pressing her hand as a father might do towards a daughter. "How long do you remain in London?"

"Eh?" she ejaculated, as if startled by the question. "Oh! not another hour, provided you assist me in this respect. I am going away—and—and it will perhaps be a long time before you will see me again."

"A long time before I may see you again," said the Marquis, echoing her words in a musing tone, as he revolved in his mind the amount of money he should bestow upon her: then, taking a hint from her observation, he added, "Well, if you are going away from London—and if I shall not see you for a long time—I must ensure you against want and misery. Remain here for a few minutes."

And the Marquis hurried from the room.

Repairing straight to his own chamber, he took out a bundle of Bank-notes from the drawer which has already been mentioned; and selecting enough to make up two thousand guineas, he hastened back to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

Why he pitched upon this precise sum, it is not easy to say. He assuredly had no particular motive in doing so: but perhaps it was because this amount was uppermost in his mind whenever he thought of money-matters at all—inasmuch as it was the sum he had engaged to pay for the restoration of his pocket-book. Or else, as he had once before presented Ernestina with that amount, since her marriage, he was led to manifest an equal liberality on this occasion.

However,—be the influence which ruled him at the moment what it may,—such was the sum that he placed in her hands on his return to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

"Here are two thousand guineas, Ernestina," he said: "and may they prove really and truly serviceable——"

But she cut short his words by throwing herself into his arms—and laying her head on his shoulder, she sobbed aloud.

"Come, my dear girl—come—cheer up," he exclaimed, considerably moved, if not deeply affected. "I can understand your sorrows, although I do not choose to allude to them. Cheer up, I say——"

"Pardon this ebullition of grief, dear uncle," said Ernestina, in a trembling tone: then, raising her head, she wiped away her tears and by a strong effort regained her composure. "Have you heard anything of Algernon lately?" she inquired.

"Yes—read this note," replied the Marquis, as he placed in her hands the letter which he had received from his nephew by the morning's post.

"Ah! Algernon is in London—and he will call upon you to-day?" cried Ernestina. "I have not seen him now for more than a year," she added, in a tone of profound melancholy: "and when last we met——"

"You had words—and you parted in anger," said the Marquis of Leveson. "I have not forgotten that you told me this circumstance. Indeed, it was soon afterwards that Algernon adopted the singular—strange—mad—insulting resolution, which has so embittered me against him!"

"Alas! poor brother!" murmured Lady Ernestina Dysart, her fair bosom swelling with a painful sob. "I dare not remain to meet him," she added, in a musing tone, and forgetting that her words met her uncle's ear.

"Why should you not dare to meet him?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily. "Was your quarrel of so serious a nature?—for you will be pleased to remember that I am unacquainted with the particulars."

"Let us not dwell upon the subject, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, in a tone of entreaty. "Indeed, I must take my leave of you—I must say farewell!"—and she rose from her seat.

"Farewell, niece—farewell, my dear Ernestina," exclaimed the nobleman, pressing his lips once more to her forehead. "You know that I wish you all possible happiness—and if, now and then, you choose to write me a line——"

"I will, I will, dear uncle," cried the lady, in a tone which expressed the joy she felt at the kind hint thus breathed in her ears. "Once more farewell!"

And having embraced her uncle affectionately, Ernestina Dysart hurried from the room.

Scarcely had the Marquis of Leveson recovered from the excitement produced by this interview with his niece, when the door of the Crimson Drawing-Room was again thrown open—and Lord Algernon Cavendish was announced.

The Marquis gave a cold and scarcely perceptible inclination of the head, in acknowledgment of the equally cold but somewhat more decided sala-

tation on the part of the young nobleman who was alike his nephew and his heir.

Algernon was younger than his sister, but equally handsome, though of a different style of beauty; and his appearance was altogether more intellectual—more expressive of fine feelings—and more indicative of a lofty character, than that of Lady Ernestina Dysart.

"My lord," he said, as he entered the room, "I repeat orally the regret which I recorded in writing, at being compelled thus to seek your lordship's presence——"

"Is there contamination in it, proud boy?" demanded the Marquis, his sneering tone and scornful look contrasting strangely with the mild voice and affectionate demeanour that he had adopted towards the young man's sister so short a time previously.

"My lord," answered Algernon, with a dignified firmness, "if anything bordering upon a quarrel takes place between us, it will be of your lordship's seeking. Although I can never regard your lordship with love or esteem, I do not wish to treat you with disrespect."

"Is not the whole tenour of your conduct an outrage, Lord Algernon Cavendish?" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson angrily. "I have given you your proper name: why should you be ashamed of it?"

"Oh! ashamed of it—heaven knows that I am ashamed of it!" cried the young lord, with impassioned sincerity. "But I beseech you not to force me into a discussion which will only re-open so many wounds. With your permission, therefore, I will proceed to state the object of my visit to your lordship."

"Go on, Lord Algernon Cavendish," said the Marquis of Leveson, who seemed to take delight in throwing the young man's name at him as if it were a taunt: and the old nobleman remained standing, in order that he might not be compelled to ask his nephew to be seated.

"I require some money, my lord," answered the latter, in a tone of ingenuous candour and frank confidence; "and I thought perhaps that you would prefer letting me have it, rather than compel me to seek the assistance of money-lenders."

"Artlessly spoken, upon my honour!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, with an ironical laugh, "And you, Lord Algernon Cavendish, who are so particular—so very strait-laced—so extremely punctilious,—*you* talk of flying to money-brokers and usurers!"

"And wherefore not, my lord?" asked the young nobleman, with the unruffled voice and calm demeanour of one who is conscious of no wrong and who is practising no duplicity. "The affair is very plain and simple. Circumstances have arisen which render it necessary that I should have two or three thousand guineas at the present moment; and——"

"And you come to me as a matter of right?" said the Marquis, with a sneer. "But suppose that I refer you to the Jew discounters——"

"No, my lord—I shall address myself to some respectable solicitor or conveyancer?" interrupted Algernon, still maintaining a calm dignity of demeanour.

"And they will doubtless suppose that I am ruined or in pecuniary embarrassments, and unable to assist you!" exclaimed the Marquis, angrily. "But they shall not have an opportunity of spreading false reports concerning me," added the nobleman, who was as vain of his reputation for wealth as he was proud of his haughty title: "and although my nephew Lord Algernon Cavendish does declare that I dissipate all my revenues in luxury and debauchery, I will show him that I can spare two or three thousand guineas for *his* wants, whatever they may be. Yes—and more generous, too, than he, I shall not even ask the purpose for which he needs the amount. Now then, Lord Algernon Cavendish—be pleased to name the exact sum which you require."

"Two thousand guineas will be sufficient, my lord," answered the young nobleman, studiously avoiding any inflammatory comment upon his uncle's bitter and sarcastic speech.

"Two thousand guineas—eh?" murmured the Marquis to himself: "everything is two thousand guineas to-day! Indeed this is the day of days for strange coincidences. But wait a few moments," he said aloud, "while I fetch my cheque-book."

And the old nobleman quitted the apartment.

In about five minutes he returned: and as he opened the door, he was struck by surprise on beholding Lord Algernon examining one of the pistols which had been deposited in the vases and concealed by the nosegays.

"What means this prying disposition, insolent boy?" exclaimed the Marquis, in an angry tone.

"Your lordship will pardon me, I am sure," said the young nobleman, with unchanging demeanour: "but, being passionately fond of flowers, I took up that nosegay,"—pointing to the *bouquet*, which he had laid upon the table,—"and inside the vase I beheld the pistol. Conceiving that it could be nothing more than an admirably contrived porcelain ornament, I was curious enough to take it out of the vase in order to examine it: and my astonishment at finding it to be a real weapon had not subsided when your lordship returned to the room. If I have done wrong, I am sorry: but I have given this long explanation because I would not for a moment seem to be of an impertinently prying or rudely curious disposition."

The Marquis of Leveson looked very hard at his nephew while the latter was thus speaking: but the young man flinched not beneath the survey—and the old nobleman appeared satisfied that the proceeding was in reality as innocent and meaningless as it was represented.

Lord Algernon, without another word, put back the pistol into the porcelain vase and replaced the nosegay: while the Marquis of Leveson sate down and wrote a cheque upon his bankers for five thousand guineas.

"There, Lord Algernon Cavendish," he said, as he handed his nephew the draft with a frigid politeness, "this will save you the necessity of applying to usurers—or respectable solicitors," he added ironically.

"I thank your lordship," returned Algernon. "May I inquire if you have seen or heard from my sister recently?"

"Lady Ernestina has been with me this day," answered the old nobleman.

"This day!" echoed Algernon. "Then she is in London? But her husband ——"

"Mention not his name, sir,—allude to him

not!" cried the Marquis, fiercely. "Have you, anything more to say to me?"

"Only to inquire Ernestina's address—for, being in town, I will see her—and—and we will embrace as brother and sister ought," said the young nobleman, his voice becoming tremulous with painful but touching reminiscences.

"In good sooth," ejaculated the Marquis, "I did not think of demanding where she was staying. But her visit to London is a mere flying one—made in strict *incognito*—and moreover she did not remain three-quarters of an hour with me altogether. Beyond this, I have no information to give you on your sister's account."

"I will not ask if she is happy," said the young nobleman, with a profound sigh; "because I know that she cannot be! My lord, I will not detain you longer—I beg to say farewell."

"Farewell, Lord Algernon Cavendish," returned the Marquis of Leveson, flinging a taunt as it were after his nephew even at the moment of departure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS BATHURST AND MRS. OWEN.—THE POCKET-BOOK!

At three o'clock punctually, an elegant carriage drove up to the door of Leveson House in Albemarle Street; and a lady, dressed with richness and even splendour, alighted.

She was about five-and-forty years of age, and retained the traces of great beauty. Her dark hair was still unstreaked with silver—her eyes were large and piercing—and her teeth were admirably preserved. Upon her cheeks art had shed the bloom which once was natural there; and although somewhat thin, her figure was well proportioned.

On introducing her to the Crimson Drawing-Room, the footman announced Miss Bathurst.

"My dear friend," said the Marquis of Leveson, hastening forward to welcome her, "you are indeed punctual to your appointment:"—then, as he handed her to a seat, he observed, "And, upon my honour! looking as young and as handsome as ever!"

"Flatterer!" exclaimed Miss Bathurst, with a smile, showing that the compliment was far from disagreeable. "But your lordship is famous for the utterance of those amiable nothings——"

"Oh! fie," ejaculated the Marquis. "Is it a mere meaningless phrase to assure Miss Bathurst that she never looked better in her life. But, after all, a lady of two or three-and-thirty is in the bloom of her existence——"

"And your lordship at five-and-forty is a perfect prodigy of youthfulness," rejoined the lady. "You and I, my dear Marquis, *may* talk of our age, for old acquaintance' sake."

"Yes — to be sure we may," observed the nobleman, glancing at himself complaisantly in the mirror over the mantel.

Now he knew full well that Miss Bathurst was at least five-and-forty—while the lady, on the other hand, was equally aware that his lordship could not be a day under sixty: but they chose thus to compliment and flatter each other, being mutually silly and vain enough to fancy that the one believed the other to be sincere.

"Why, how long have we been acquainted, my dear Marquis?" said the lady, after a pause. "Surely it must be twenty years?"

"Yes—I should think it must," was the response.

"But then we were so young at the time?" said Miss Bathurst.

"To be sure!—a mere boy and girl," observed the Marquis, with a sigh, "Do you remember the first time you ever saw the Prince?"

"Oh! don't talk to me of the Prince—I hate him!" exclaimed Miss Bathurst, petulantly. "You, my dear Marquis, who are acquainted with everything that has taken place between us, can judge whether I have been well used, or not?"

"Why should you complain, my dear friend?" said the nobleman, in a soothing tone. "You have not been worse treated than others. Look at Mrs. Fitzherbert—Lady Jersey—the Duchess of Devonshire—and a host of other beauties—some dead, and some still living——"

"Well, we have all had the supreme honour of being the mistresses of his Royal Highness," exclaimed Miss Bathurst, bitterly; "and he cares not one fig for the memory of those who are gone or the welfare of those who are living."

"You should not say that, my dear friend," observed the Marquis. "His Royal Highness always speaks of you with the utmost consideration: but then, as the world does not generally know how tender your intimacy has been, the Prince has never paid you such particular attention in public as to afford scope for scandal."

"You know very well that everything has been broken off for some time between the Prince and me," said Miss Bathurst. "But never mind! I am not going to inflict a long tirade concerning my grievances, real or imaginary. I come to ask you a favour."

"Of what kind?" demanded the Marquis, who had already anticipated the object of her visit.

"Instead of saying, '*Of what kind*,' my dear friend," replied Miss Bathurst, reproachfully, "you should say, '*The favour is already granted.*'"

"Well, the favour is already granted," exclaimed Lord Leveson, laughing: then to himself he said, "She has fairly caught me, and I must accede to her demands."

"I was convinced that I could rely upon your friendship," continued Miss Bathurst. "In plain terms, I want you to lend me a couple of thousand guineas for a few weeks; and I shall be enabled to settle with you for everything altogether."

"A couple of thousand guineas!" ejaculated the nobleman, with a start.

"My lord, if this request be disagreeable to you," said Miss Bathurst, with an air of offended pride, "I am sorry that I should have exposed myself to the mortification of a refusal."

"Not at all!—you have misunderstood me!" exclaimed the nobleman, unwilling either to annoy or irritate so old a friend. "I can assure you that my ejaculation meant nothing personal: but you said two thousand guineas—and there is a strange coincidence——But no matter!" he cried, suddenly checking himself. "You shall have the money, with pleasure."

"I knew, my dear Marquis, that I could rely upon your kindness," observed Miss Bathurst.

"You are aware that I possess a tolerable income: but I have latterly had many and heavy drains upon me——However, it is not worth while to enter into particulars."

"I hope that Horace Sackville is not extravagant," said the Marquis.

"Not exactly extravagant," replied Miss Bathurst: "but my nephew is necessarily expensive, moving as he does in the best society. He is, however, an excellent young man——"

"And a great favourite with us all," added the Marquis of Leveson. "But I will write you a cheque for the two thousand guineas——"

"Have you no Bank-notes in the house?" inquired Miss Bathurst. "I am anxious to return straight home to Stratton Street; and I shall have to make sundry disbursements the instant I get back."

"I can give you a portion in notes and gold, I dare say," observed the Marquis. "Excuse me for a few minutes:"—and he left the room to pay another visit to his private drawer up-stairs.

On his return he beheld Miss Bathurst examining with minute attention all the elegant and costly ornaments so profusely scattered about the Crimson Drawing Room.

"This is really a superb apartment, my dear Marquis," she exclaimed. "Often as I have visited your mansion, I have never been in this particular room before. What splended draperies!—what a beautiful ceiling! The picture of sun-rise is so thoroughly natural! And what exquisite vases!" she added, her eyes as they swept about the room in all directions, settling for a few moments upon the very porcelain jars in which the pistols were hidden beneath the nosegays of flowers. "I never admired the general effect—the striking *tout ensemble*—of a drawing-room, so much in all my life!"

"I am charmed that it pleases you," said the Marquis: then, in a significant tone and with an equally meaning look, he observed, "But you *have* been in this room before—when it was furnished in a totally different style—all white silk and satin——"

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed Miss Bathurst, the blood mantling with so deep a dye upon her cheeks as to show through the artificial bloom of the rouge. "Then that door——"

"Opens into the apartments to which the Prince beguiled you in your girlhood," responded the Marquis of Leveson, his tone and look alike indicating all the gloating enjoyment which one voluptuary experiences at the thought of another's triumphs.

"Many years have elapsed since then," murmured the lady to herself, as she heaved a profound sigh: then, starting as it were from the train of thoughts into which she had fallen, she said, "But I am idling here and wasting your time also, my dear Marquis. Where is the money?"

"I can give you five hundred guineas in notes and gold, and the remainder in a draft on my banker," returned the nobleman.

"That will answer my purpose very well," said Miss Bathurst: then, having received the money, she bade Lord Leveson farewell and took her departure.

It was now half-past four o'clock—and the Marquis began to wonder whether the pocket-book would be brought to him and its ransom-money claimed this day. He advanced towards the window: and still, motionless as a statue and in a piteous attitude of grovelling mendicancy, stood the beggar on the opposite side of Albemarle Street. The fellow's countenance was upturned, as if towards heaven: but the Marquis knew full well that his eyes were fixed upon the window of Stephen Brockman's chamber, which was over the Crimson Drawing-Room.

Scarcely had Lord Leveson turned away from the casement again, when a post-chaise and pair drove up to the mansion; and Mrs. Owen was shortly afterwards announced.

But the instant she entered the apartment, the nobleman saw that her countenance wore an expression of extreme trouble and agitation: mingled grief and rage were visibly depicted upon her features.

"What in heaven's name, my dear Anne, has occurred?" he demanded, hastening forward to meet her.

"Oh! my dear Leveson," she answered, in a voice indicative of turbulent emotions,—"such a misfortune!—such a calamity!"

And she threw herself, with evident exhaustion, upon a sofa.

"Explain yourself!" cried the Marquis. "What has happened?"

"That ungrateful, deceitful little minx, Mary," said Mrs. Owen, gasping for breath and fanning herself with her handkerchief.

"Your youngest daughter? Well, proceed," exclaimed the Marquis, impatiently.

"She has fled—absconded—run away!" answered Mrs. Owen:—and then she burst forth into the bitterest lamentations.

The Marquis besought her to explain the particulars of the occurrence: and after some trouble, owing to the violence of the lady's mingled anger and grief, he succeeded in eliciting the following details.

Pursuant to the arrangements specified in Mrs. Owen's letter to the Marquis, she had taken her four daughters to Woolwich, where they were to embark for the continent, in order to enter upon the particular career for which they had been trained, and the astounding nature of which will transpire in due course. Agatha, Emma, and Julia were all three in ecstacy at the prospects which opened before them: but Mary, the youngest, evidently sustained a forced gaiety throughout the journey from Richmond to Woolwich. On arriving at the last mentioned place, Mrs. Owen ordered the post-chaise to drive to an hotel, where she and her daughters alighted to take refreshments previous to the embarkation of the young ladies. Soon afterwards Mary quitted the room on some excuse: and as she did not return, her mother and sisters grew uneasy. An hour elapsed: and still she appeared not. Alarm was enhanced into terror mingled with bewilderment: but at last all uncertainty was cleared up by the arrival of the following letter, which was put into Mrs. Owen's hands by the chamber-maid of the hotel:—

"Mother and Sisters, I must bid you farewell! I have striven—Oh! God knows how I have striven—to tutor my mind to this career for which I have been trained: but it is useless! I cannot bring myself to contemplate it otherwise than with loathing and abhorrence. I would sooner perish the most miserable of deaths, than calmly and deliberately enter upon a course of such fearful duplicity—such transcendent wickedness—such immitigable cruelty! No, no—God preserve me from such crimes! It goes to my heart to tear myself from my dear sisters——But, O mother! mother! will you not sooner or later repent ——

"I can write no more. God bless and forgive you—yes, and change your hearts! I will not betray you—but I cannot become the accomplice in such black iniquity!

"The unhappy and almost distracted,

"MARY."

This letter, which was blotted with the traces of many tears, had been left upon the table in a chamber to which the young lady had retired; and the maid having found it, delivered it to Mrs. Owen, to whom it was addressed. But Mary—the unhappy Mary—had disappeared, to the mingled grief and anger of her mother and sisters. The vessel was however ready to sail: Agatha, Emma, and Julia accordingly took leave of Mrs. Owen and embarked—and the mother, having thus lost as it were all her daughters, repaired to London in order to keep the appointment which her letter had fixed with the Marquis of Leveson.

Such were the particulars which the nobleman gleaned from Mrs. Owen, who likewise handed to him for his perusal the above note which the fugitive Mary had left upon the table at the hotel in Woolwich.

"It is awkward—very awkward," observed the Marquis. "But she promises not to betray the one grand secret—and from the tenour of her letter it is clear that her mind is profoundly influenced by the affection which she entertains for yourself and her sisters. This influence will not only keep her lips sealed while absent, but will speedily bring her home to you again."

"If I thought so, I should be far less uneasy than I am," said Mrs. Owen. "But she is young—inexperienced—beautiful—and if some designing villain falls in with her, he may entice her to reveal all those secrets ——"

"Let us not anticipate misfortunes nor meet calamities half-way," cried the Marquis. "Console yourself, my dear Anne—console yourself: and tell me what you wished to communicate—for your letter hinted that you had something to say to me."

"Oh! this cruel affliction has well nigh driven all other subjects from my mind," exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "But the matter to which my note alluded is a pecuniary one. You are aware of the enormous expense to which the outfit of my daughter has put me. Their dresses—their jewels ——"

"I understand all that very well," interrupted the Marquis. "But I thought that the Queen had pledged herself to pay every expense?"

"Her Majesty guaranteed me all my outlay to the extent of two thousand five hundred guineas," answered Mrs. Owen. "Five hundred her Majesty has paid me: but her letter of yesterday tells me that I must wait a short time for the remaining two thousand guineas, as she is somewhat embarrassed at the moment in respect to funds available for secret purposes. Now, my dear Leveson, you know her Majesty's meanness as well as I do—and you must agree with me that she will endeavour to postpone the payment of these two thousand guineas as long as she can. The want of the money troubles me much. The jeweller's bill is eight hundred guineas—each of the girls being obliged to have a complete set of diamonds, in addition to other costly articles. Then there is the milliner's bill, four hundred and fifty guineas ——"

"My dear friend," interrupted the Marquis of Leveson, "I do not require you to enumerate all these details. I can perfectly understand that the bills are owing—and, what is more, that they must be paid. If you will give me a receipt for the amount, so that I may obtain it of Her Majesty the Queen, who will not be able to put me off with excuses so easily as she can you, I will at once write you a cheque for the two thousand guineas."

"This is precisely the favour which I was about to solicit," said Mrs. Owen. "But do you know, my dear Leveson, I am so exhausted—so overcome—that I must beg you to ring for a glass of wine ——"

"Or a drop of that precious cordial, Anne, which the Prince gave me some years ago, and which you have occasionally tasted?" suggested the Marquis. "I have a bottle left—but it is in my own chamber—and Brockman shall fetch it."

Thus speaking, the Marquis was about to ring the bell, when he recollected that his faithful valet must be up in his own room, according to the instruction given him in the morning. The nobleman therefore said something about Brockman's being engaged, and volunteered to hasten and procure the cordial himself. Mrs. Owen thanked him for the trouble which he thus took in her behalf; and his lordship hurried from the apartment.

When he returned at the expiration of a few minutes, he found Mrs. Owen lying in apparently a very exhausted condition upon the sofa: but the racy liqueur which he had brought with him, soon effected a marvellous change in her condition. Her physical energies and her spirits both revived; and it seemed as if she had been partaking of the elixir of life.

"The resuscitating power of this cordial is truly marvellous," observed Leveson, with a smile. "You feel better now?"

"I feel as if a new existence were infused into my veins," answered Mrs. Owen. "My dear friend, I am deeply indebted to you for this kindness. The fatigues of travelling—the annoyance produced by the Queen's postponement of the promised money—and then the terrible affliction relative to Mary,—all these influences had completely prostrated me. But now I am myself again—and I must return home to Richmond without delay."

She accordingly penned the receipt for the two thousand guineas; and the Marquis sate down to write a cheque for that amount. But an ejaculation fell from his lips, as the coincidence struck him that it was *again*, and for the *fourth* time, a sum of two thousand guineas which he was about to pay away: and yet *the* demand for that amount had not as yet been made upon him. Mrs. Owen looked at him in surprise as he gave utterance to that exclamation: but he made some excuse and proceeded to fill up the cheque. The business was thus terminated—and Mrs. Owen took her leave.

It was now nearly six o'clock in the evening: and the Marquis of Leveson began to be seriously alarmed lest the expected visitor with the pocket-book should not come at all. He was annoyed, inasmuch as that pocket-book contained several *billets-doux*, the contents of which, if made public, would seriously compromise the reputation of two or three ladies of high rank: it likewise contained some private *memoranda* relative to the affair for which Mrs. Owen's daughters had been destined—and also a few letters from the Prince Regent, of

a somewhat serious nature. In a word, it was highly important to the Marquis that he should regain possession of his pocket-book. And, after all, there was yet plenty of time for this restoration to take place: it was only six o'clock in the evening—and an emissary from the masked desperado might come by eight—or even by ten o'clock: nay, if that were all, there was hope even up to midnight—for the unknown chief had said, "*Remain at home all day long on Wednesday and take care to have the two thousand guineas ready at hand—indeed, about your person—and leave the rest to me.*"

"Well, then," thought the Marquis to himself, "Wednesday is not over until midnight—and I shall not despair in the interval."

Having strengthened his hopes by means of this reflection, he rang the bell and ordered dinner to be served up. In about half-an-hour a luxurious little repast was spread upon the table in the Crimson Drawing-Room; and the nobleman lingered over it in order to while away the time. Eight o'clock struck ere he had the last course removed and the dessert placed before him. Then he amused himself with the fruit and the wine pleasantly enough for a couple of hours.

It was now ten o'clock. Meanwhile the curtains had been closed and the lamps lighted in the Crimson Drawing-Room.

The Marquis rose from his seat and paced the apartment with increasing nervousness. Was it not intended to keep the appointment?—had the seal on the envelope of the pocket-book been violated, and the contents scrutinized?—and was the restoration of the pocket-book to be delayed for purposes of increased extortion? These and a hundred other perplexing queries did the Marquis put to himself as he paced to and fro in the apartment.

The time-piece upon the mantel struck eleven. He went to the window and drew aside the curtains. By the light of the street lamp he saw the beggar-man still at his post.

"At all events *he* does not despair," said the Marquis to himself, as he quitted the casement: "nor shall I just yet! There is another hour."

But this hour passed away—and still no one came. Midnight now struck—and Wednesday was gone!

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Marquis aloud. "I have been gulled—duped—deceived—made a fool of! The rascal never meant to keep faith with me! Eternal maledictions be upon him! And all my fine precautions are set at naught. In good truth, Lord Leveson feels uncommonly small at this moment!"

As he uttered these words in a voice of bitter vexation, he filled a bumper of wine and tossed it off.

"It is useless to wait any longer," he muttered to himself: and he was about to quit the room, when he recollected the pistols in the vases. "I must not leave them there—and Brockman may forget to remove them. If any of the other servants should find them, they would think it strange: and moreover, as they are loaded, an accident might occur."

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson approached the nearest vase: and as it was the one in which his nephew Algernon had discovered the pistol, it reminded him of that incident.

"He must have been astonished at finding a loaded weapon in such a place," thought the Marquis,—"especially concealed under so beauteous a nosegay! What could he have imagined? But little reck I for his suspicions or his conjectures."

Having taken out the pistol from the first vase, the nobleman now approached the other one. He removed the nosegay—he thrust in his hand—and an ejaculation of wonderment burst from his lips as he drew forth a packet, which he instantaneously recognised to be the one containing the much-thought-of pocket-book!

Yes—there it was, precisely as he had last seen it, in the chamber hung with black cloth, on the Monday night!—there it was, with the seal of the envelope unbroken! To tear off that envelope and assure himself that the pocket-book was really inside, was now the work of a moment: and no disappointment was experienced!

Wonder of wonders!—how could this have happened?

Instinctively the Marquis of Leveson thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and drew forth the Bank-notes, the numbers of which he had so carefully taken. The pocket-book, then, had been restored without the ransom-money! But whose hand had consigned it to that vase?

The Marquis re-examined the porcelain jar. He drew forth the pistol: but there was nothing else in this vase—no note, not a written line or even a scrap of paper to throw a gleam on the darkness of this mystery!

He rang the bell, and ordered Stephen Brockman to be sent to him.

"When you deposited the pistol in that vase this morning," he inquired the moment the valet made his appearance, "did you observe anything else there?"

"I am sure, my lord, that there was nothing in either of the vases," was the response; "because I dusted them before I put in the pistols and the nosegays."

"Most extraordinary!" ejaculated the nobleman, scarcely able to believe that the whole was otherwise than a dream.

He advanced to the window and looked out. The beggar-man was gone.

"He was only to remain until midnight," muttered the Marquis to himself: then turning towards Brockman, he said, "The duty which I enjoined you to perform in your chamber, has been uncalled for. The truth is, I was robbed of my pocket-book on Monday night; and the robber undertook to return it this day for a certain sum of money. I have had an officer in disguise waiting in the street; and the pulling up of the blind in your room was to have been the signal for him to follow any one who should immediately afterwards leave the house. But the pocket-book has been restored by other means. You may now retire: I shall not go to bed for half-an-hour, or so."

Brockman withdrew, much mystified by the rapid, laconic, and somewhat incoherent explanations which his master had volunteered;—and the nobleman sate himself down to reflect upon an incident the nature of which however seemed to defy all conjecture.

And this was the current of his musings:—

"That pocket-book was not in the vase when the pistol was placed there. Brockman clearly

establishes this fact. But can I believe him? Yes: it is impossible that he should be in league with the desperadoes: for if he were, he would not restore the pocket-book without obtaining the two thousand guineas. All suspicion against him, were I inclined to entertain any, must therefore be dismissed at once. And now in what a perplexity am I involved? Throughout the day have I been in this room—quitting it only on four occasions—and then leaving some one here. I have received, too, four visitors. The first was my niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart. I left the room to procure her the money she required. Of course she could not have put the pocket-book in the vase: such an idea were utterly preposterous! Next came my nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish. I left the room to fetch my cheque-book. But, with all my ill-feeling towards Algernon, I cannot for a moment blind myself to the fact that he is a noble-minded young man and incapable of leaguing himself with robbers and villains. Next came Miss Bathurst. I left the room a third time—and on this occasion it was to procure some available cash. But Miss Bathurst cannot possibly have anything in common with the plunderers of pocket-books. Lastly came Mrs. Owen. A fourth time did I quit the apartment: it was to procure the cordial. I would, however, much sooner believe that the whole affair is a delusion and a dream, than that Mrs. Owen has anything to do with a gang of scoundrels. The pocket-book, then, was not deposited in that vase by either Ernestina—Algernon—Miss Bathurst—or Mrs. Owen. And no other visitors have been near me! But what renders the whole proceeding so strange—so singular—so very remarkable, is that *each* of my four visitors received from me the precise sum which was stipulated by the masked robber as the ransom-money for the pocket-book: and yet the pocket-book is restored without any ransom being demanded at all! What can I think?—upon what conjecture can my mind possibly settle? All is bewilderment,—perplexity—confusion—darkness! And yet I have been awake the whole day: not for an instant could I have been caught napping. No one could possibly have entered this room without being perceived by me. Nor was it worth while for the depredator to have restored the pocket-book thus stealthily, since he received no ransom-money. If he made up his mind to return it *without* the ransom-money, he could as well have sent it by a messenger or delivered it himself at the street-door. He might have wrapped it up in brown paper, and sent it as a coach-parcel. But no such thing! It is deposited in a vase in the room where I remain the whole day and receive my visitors. What am I to think?—where are my suspicions to settle?"

And having expended an hour in such vain and unsatisfactory meditations as these, the Marquis of Leveson retired to his own apartment: but when slumber fell upon his eyes, the mystery of the pocket book haunted him in his dreams.

CHAPTER XIX.

WEDNESDAY: OR, THE THIRD SUITOR.

Thus passed this memorable Wednesday with the Marquis of Leveson: but we must not forget that it was also the day which had fallen to the lot of Colonel Malpas, in order to be used by him for any designs which he might conceive relative to the beauteous Miss Trelawney.

It was, then, in the evening of this same memorable Wednesday, that if we peep into the elegantly-furnished boudoir at Acacia Cottage, we shall find Venetia engaged with the business of the toilette.

Jessica, her lady's-maid, is exerting all her skill in setting off the charms of her mistress to their greatest advantage: as if they were not already matchless—beyond the adventitious auxiliaries of ornament or dress!

How superb is that auburn hair, with its rich velvet-like gloss!—what queenly crown or what diadem of an empress can compare therewith? And how dazzlingly white are those softly-rounded and sloping shoulders!—how voluptuously grand the half-exposed amplitude of the luxuriant bust! She does not make the slightest movement without revealing some new charm—without developing some new grace. Her whole form breathes love and tenderness,—for her eyes have that gently languishing look which makes their expression softly amorous, if not absolutely wicked and wanton,—and her lips, of dewy redness, appear to exhale elysian sweets.

Jessica, who loves her well and is unfeignedly proud of her mistress's glowing beauties and resplendent charms, is delighted with her appearance. But Jessica is not alone with Venetia Trelawney in the boudoir upon the present occasion. A young lady is likewise there; and while she assists in the toilette, she fails not to echo all the compliments that fall from Jessica's lips.

This young lady was Miss Arbuthnot, the daughter of Venetia's "companion." She was about four or five-and-twenty years of age, tolerably well-looking, and nearly as tall as Venetia. She had been staying with some relations in the country, and had now come up to town to pass a short time at Acacia Cottage.

When the toilette was pretty nearly completed, Mrs. Arbuthnot herself entered the boudoir and added her praises to those which her daughter and Jessica were bestowing upon Venetia's appearance—so that the object of all these compliments (for flatteries they were not) was compelled to beseech her friends and her maid to be more sparing in the outpourings of their enthusiastic admiration.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a lady of about fifty years of age. She was what is called "a poor gentlewoman, very well connected,"—the death of her husband having left her without any visible means of income. Her daughter, whose name was Penelope, found a home with some relatives in the country; while Mrs. Arbuthnot herself became "companion" to an old lady. Upon this old lady's demise, circumstances enabled Mrs. Arbuthnot to obtain an introduction to Miss Trelawney, who was at the moment taking up her abode at Acacia Cottage: and thus was it that Venetia obtained her duenna-like companion.

In appearance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was a good-humoured, well-mannered, and obliging woman. She was very bustling and active—always the first up in the house in the morning, and the first to observe that "it was bed-time" at night. She never

allowed the servants to be idle: but still she managed them without much scolding—and, what is more remarkable still, without making them her enemies. She drank a glass of wine with evident satisfaction—and did not object to a *leetle* drop of warm brandy-and-water in the evening. Like all persons in her dependant condition, she was inclined to be over-complimentary, and to forget that she had a right to entertain an opinion of her own: and this constant habit of sacrificing, veiling, or forcing her feelings, naturally rendered her an adept in all the little arts of duplicity, deceit, and hypocrisy. Whether she was utterly and completely false,—or whether this ductile and pliant disposition on her part was only a very venial weakness, without any sinister intention,—could not possibly be ascertained on a short acquaintance. But though Venetia's knowledge of her was limited to the experience of a few weeks, the young lady appeared to place full and implicit confidence in her duenna-like companion.

Living as Miss Trelawney was,—her own mistress, young and handsome, reputed to be well off, and unmarried,—she could not have dispensed with some person in Mrs. Arbuthnot's capacity. Having no relatives residing with her, the companionship of an elderly, respectable, matron-like female was absolutely necessary, on the score of propriety and protection. Thus was it that Mrs. Arbuthnot accompanied Venetia in the carriage and to the theatre—sate down to table with her—occupied the next bed-chamber at Acacia Cottage—and superintended all the domestic arrangements of the household. For these duties and services, she received a salary at the rate of sixty guineas a-year, in addition to board, lodging, and all kinds of perquisites.

But to return to the thread of our narrative. Venetia's toilette was completed: and she looked radiantly handsome—overpoweringly lovely. Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were also dressed in evening costume: and, the carriage being announced at

about eight o'clock, they entered it and were driven to the residence of Lady Wenlock in the neighbourhood of Kew.

Her ladyship gave on this occasion an entertainment which she was pleased to denominate an autumnal fête. The mansion stood in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, consisting of gardens, shrubberies, shady avenues, and delicious arbours. Fountains and fish-ponds varied the picturesque scene; and conservatories of fruits and flowers were scattered about in all directions. The entire enclosure was now one vast illumination, produced by myriads of variegated lamps; so that in the deepest recesses of the bowers and in the vistas of the largest avenues, it was as light as day.

The effect was brilliant and dazzling. The pools, in which the gold and silver fish disported, were penetrated with the living lustre: the conservatories, all of glass, shone as if in a perfect blaze;—and the fountains scattered their myriads of drops as if the shining waters flung gems around in their ceaseless play.

Lady Wenlock was a wealthy widow about sixty years of age, and remarkable for the hospitality of her disposition and the brilliancy of her entertainments. Though well stricken in years, she loved to see young persons happy; and her greatest delight was in gathering around her a host of youthful guests who would lay aside all extreme formalities and indulge in the exuberance of innocent mirth. Though perfectly lady like in her bearing and polished in her manners, there was no frigid reserve nor affectation about her; she was thoroughly open-hearted, frank, and good-natured—and everybody felt "at home" when partaking of her hospitality.

With this excellent lady Miss Arbuthnot was well acquainted; and she had therefore easily procured a card of invitation for Miss Trelawney. The grounds were already thronged with guests when Venetia, her "companion," and Penelope arrived at the mansion; and from Lady Wenlock did Miss Trelawney experience a cordial welcome. Her appearance in the gardens was moreover productive of a great sensation—for her extraordinary beauty was such that no man could gaze upon without emotion, and no female eye could contemplate without admiration, tinged as this sentiment might also be with envy.

But scarcely had Venetia and the Arbuthnots thus made their appearance, when Colonel Malpas, who was one of the numerous guests already arrived, hastened up to Lady Wenlock and begged her ladyship to introduce him to Miss Trelawney.

"Oh! certainly," said the good-natured hostess: "and as Miss Trelawney and her friends are unaccompanied by any gentleman, I shall consign them, Colonel, to your especial care."

This arrangement was within the strictest rules of etiquette, and also of propriety—the more so as Malpas was a married man, although his wife was not present at the festival.

Accompanying the Colonel to the spot where Venetia, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Penelope were pausing to admire a beautiful fountain, Lady Wenlock introduced him to the three ladies—observing with the good-natured smile and cordial manner so well becoming a hostess who knows how to do the honours of her entertainments, "I have consigned you to the care of Colonel Malpas—and I shall be very angry with him indeed if he do not make himself agreeable."

"I can assure your ladyship," said the Colonel, with his most approved drawing-room drawl, "that if I fail in this respect, it will not be for want of inclination."

"I am certain of that, Colonel," replied Lady Wenlock: and off she sped to greet some new arrivals.

There was a slight deepening of the natural bloom on Venetia's cheeks as she bowed to Colonel Malpas when the introduction took place: and for a moment—a single moment—there was a naughty curl of her beauteous lip as she beheld an expression of mingled triumph and satisfaction sweep over the Colonel's countenance.

He offered her his arm, which she took: that is to say, she just laid her white-gloved fingers so lightly upon it that it was utterly impossible for him to feel the pressure of her hand at all. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope walked together in front: and in this manner did the party enter one of the brilliantly-illuminated avenues.

"This is a pleasure, Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, "which I did not expect—and—ahem!—which is the more delightful on account of being so completely unanticipated."

"I never beheld so enchanting a domain," observed Venetia, taking no notice of his clumsily-worded and awkwardly-delivered compliment. "It is a perfect paradise; and the beauty of all the arrangements is blended with the most exquisite taste."

"Beautiful beings are necessarily judges of beautiful things," said the Colonel.

"Yes—I have no doubt that Lady Wenlock was very handsome in her youth," returned Miss Trelawney, with an air of artless gaiety; "and therefore, if there be any truth in your remark, it is not astonishing that her ladyship should have had her grounds laid out so handsomely."

There was a slight and scarcely perceptible tinge of irony in the latter portion of this sentence; and Colonel Malpas threw a piercing glance upon Venetia to ascertain if the suspicion which struck him to that effect was well founded. But the beauteous features expressed only the animation of gaiety; and the self-conceit of the gallant officer likewise tended to reassure him.

"You did not exactly comprehend my meaning, Miss Trelawney," he observed. "But no matter. I wish to speak to you upon another subject."

"The weather, doubtless?" said Venetia, with subdued archness. "Gentlemen in fashionable life invariably talk of the weather——"

"'Pon my honour, that's excellent, Miss Trelawney!" exclaimed the Colonel, with a laugh as elongated as his drawling habit of speech. "You are really very severe upon us gentlemen. But no doubt we deserve it: for whenever we enter into conversation with a lady, we are sure to observe either what a fine day it is, or what a bad one. Ha! ha! you are quite a critic, Miss Trelawney."

"At all events you admit that I am a just one, Colonel Malpas," she observed, scarcely able to conceal her disgust at his flippancy and coxcombry.

"You are, Miss Trelawney. And in order that

I may not be included in the category of gentlemen who talk on commonplace subjects," he added, speaking with greater rapidity than usual, "I will proceed to touch on the topics to which I just now alluded."

He paused for a reply: but Venetia spoke not a word. He looked in her face: its expression was that of calm indifference, as if she did not for a moment imagine that he could have anything really serious to confer upon.

"You do not believe it possible, Miss Trelawney," he continued, "that in the midst of this brilliant scene I could venture to lead your attention to a solemn subject. But I must make that endeavour: for I have been fortunate enough—fortunate, I mean, in one sense,—to become acquainted with a secret that nearly concerns you."

"A secret that nearly concerns *me*!" echoed Venetia, a sudden flush appearing upon her countenance.

"Yes—a conspiracy that is afoot against you, Miss Trelawney," answered the Colonel, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper.

"I cannot possibly understand your meaning, sir," remarked Venetia, in a cold tone.

We should here observe that owing to the loitering pace at which the Colonel had purposely walked he had succeeded in allowing Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot to get upwards of twenty or thirty yards a-head in the avenue along which they were proceeding, and where there were no other guests at the moment besides themselves.

"It is for me, Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, in answer to her observation, and assuming the confidential tone and manner of friendship or intimacy, —"it is for me to explain myself fully—and then you will comprehend me. For when I say that there is a conspiracy afoot against you ——"

"A conspiracy!" echoed Venetia, in a voice of mingled scorn and incredulity.

"Yes—a conspiracy," repeated the Colonel: "and if you will first make me a solemn promise——But surely there was some strange rustling amidst the bushes!" he suddenly cried, glancing to the right and left of the illuminated avenue of verdure.

"I heard nothing extraordinary," said Venetia. "And moreover," she continued in a dignified manner, "if there be any listeners or eaves-droppers there, it can make no difference to me, inasmuch as I am not seeking nor courting the confidence with which you appear so mysteriously anxious to honour me."

"Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the Colonel, with an ill-subdued petulance, "is it impossible for me to give you a proof of my friendship?—will you not at least condescend to hear what I may have to communicate, and then judge for yourself?"

"Proceed, sir," remarked the lady, with that cold laconicism which evinced a perfect indifference to anything Colonel Malpas could possibly have to say.

"You will give me your word, as a lady, that the communication I am going to make shall be regarded as confidential?" persisted the officer.

"The mere fact of giving such a pledge would be to invest this discourse with an importance which I do not feel disposed to ascribe to it," was Venetia's deliberate and measured answer.

An ejaculation of mingled petulance, annoyance, and wounded pride rose to the very tip of the Colonel's tongue, as he thus found himself beaten and baffled, step after step, in all his endeavours to place himself upon a friendly footing with Venetia and establish the intimacy of confidence between them. But he suppressed that ejaculation ere it obtained utterance;—and biting his lip almost till the blood came, he fixed his eyes upon her in order to read into the depths of her soul and ascertain whether she was playing some deep and unaccountable part towards him, or whether this was her natural character and disposition that she was displaying. But nothing appeared in the looks or the manner of the superb creature to warrant the belief that there was aught artificial and constrained in her demeanour, or studied and unreal in her conduct.

The Colonel was therefore alike perplexed and mortified. He knew not precisely which course to adopt—whether to proceed with his attempt to insinuate himself into her good graces by a great show of friendship, or to start upon some other tack. He was mortified, too, because he saw that his amicable advances were repulsed with a cold courtesy, and that while Venetia adhered to the rules of strict etiquette by regarding him as an acquaintance, she was decided in discouraging all endeavours on his part to place himself on a more intimate footing with her. His vanity was wounded—his pride was hurt;—and he already hated the beauteous creature in whose charms he nevertheless so eagerly longed to revel. But then he wished to possess her, not only because he was a sensualist and regarded her as the finest piece of flesh and blood that had ever yet tempted his voluptuous appetite: but also because there was a grand triumph to achieve over his five rivals who were embarked in the same enterprise and yearning for the same conquest—and likewise because there were six thousand guineas to be obtained by that victory!

"Perhaps, Miss Trelawney," he said at length, and in comment upon the last observation which had fallen from her lips,—"perhaps you will be induced to attach some little importance to my communication when you have heard it;—and I shall therefore trust to your generosity—I had almost said honour—to keep the matter a secret."

He paused for a reply: but Venetia remained silent. She was however displaying that polite attention which a well-bred lady shows to any one who is addressing himself to her: and, as the Colonel was thus satisfied that she did condescend to listen to him, he proceeded in his discourse.

"I have already hinted, Miss Trelawney, that a conspiracy is on foot against you; and I can afford you the amplest proofs that such is the case. Start not, however, when I inform you that your exceeding beauty has rendered you the object of a wager on the part of a few base and infamous voluptuaries: and inasmuch as the secret of this scandalous transaction has accidentally—or rather, providentially—reached my ears, I resolved to reveal the atrocious circumstance to you. Sorry am I to say that the personages engaged in this conspiracy are all associates and friends of my own, and with whom I cannot very well break off my intimacy: but if you will retain this matter a profound secret and condescend to follow such advice as I shall give you——There!" ejaculated the Colonel, once more interrupting himself with a sudden ejaculation of alarm, and stopping short in

the middle of the avenue at the same moment: "I could swear that I heard a rustling again in this thicket of evergreens on the right hand!"

"The same circumstance likewise struck me," said Venetia, with unruffled composure. "But if you have been recounting to my ears some secret the revelation of which may involve yourself in an unpleasant dilemma, I pray you to observe that I did not seek this confidence on your part."

"You speak, Miss Trelawney," replied the Colonel, in a trembling tone, "as if you really wanted your words to reach the ears of listeners, if such there be amongst those evergreens."

"I again declare, Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, with a calmness and an indifference that were most acutely galling to those feelings that had just rendered his voice tremulous with increasing petulance, mortification, and rage,—"I again declare that I attach no importance whatsoever to the romance with which you have been so kindly endeavouring to amuse me, doubtless for want of other topics of interest."

"Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, in a voice that trembled more and more—while he slowly led her along the avenue, all thought of the rustling in the bushes having fled from his memory in the deepening excitement to which his feelings were thus subjected,—"Miss Trelawney, do you mean me to understand that you do not believe the truth of the communication I have ventured to breathe to your ears?"

"I will answer you frankly and candidly, sir," responded Venetia, looking straight forward as she walked by his side with her hand just resting upon his arm. "You tell me of a party of individuals who have made me the subject of some wager which you yourself denounce in the strongest terms: and yet you inform me in the same breath that these persons are all intimate friends of your own, and whose intimacy you do not choose to abandon on that account. I must either suppose, then, that you openly wink at their bad proceedings, while in private you speak so emphatically to me—or that you yourself are one of the individuals who have made me the subject of their wager, and that you are betraying your fellow-conspirators. Now, in either case, Colonel Malpas, your character as a man of honour would not be enhanced in my estimation: and therefore, as I cannot of course turn round upon you, and say that you are a false traitor in one way or the other, I must of course treat the whole rhodomontade as a pleasant romance which your fertile brain has conceived in order to while away the time."

"Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, trembling with concentrated fury, "you make but a bad return for my confidence and my good intentions."

"But I did not seek your confidence, sir," replied Venetia, in that tone which conveyed remonstrance and rebuke in its very calmness: "and I can give you no credit for good intentions."

Miss Trelawney," rejoined Colonel Malpas, in a voice that was low, but deeply accentuated, "you had better make me your friend than your enemy."

"If you dare to address me in this manner, sir," exclaimed Venetia, stopping short in the middle of the avenue—withdrawing her hand from his arm—and b n'ing upon him a look that was full of dignity,—"I should do well to seek the protection of Lady Wenlock, who I am certain did not present you to me with the anticipation that I should experience this unmanly conduct at your hands."

"Miss Trelawney, you are too sensible to create a *scene*—I know you are—I am sure of it," said the Colonel, surveying her with a malignant sneer. "And therefore you may as well learn at once the truth from my lips,—which is that I love and adore you, and that I will compel you—aye, compel you—to look favourably upon me in return! Now, understand me, Miss Trelawney—I have set my whole soul—my very life—upon one enterprise: and that is, to achieve your conquest, haughty beauty that you are! By fair means or by foul, I will accomplish my aim,——Ah! you may think to scorch me with the indignant looks of those flashing eyes—or to overwhelm me with that disdain which you have at this moment assumed! But I will act as an unscrupulous ruffian—I will play a fiend's part—I will even out-herod all the scoundrels that ever yet practised their scoundrelism against woman,—yes, all this will I do if you force me to extremes! For I will destroy your reputation—I will blast your fame—I will whisper to one and breathe in the ear of another that I have possessed you—that you are my mistress—that I am secretly blessed with your favours—aye, and I will even forge amatory epistles, signed by your name, to show confidentially to my friends as proofs of all the tales that I shall thus whisper concerning thee! This is the course which I will pursue, Miss Trelawney: and even though you may be the purest of virgins, yet will I bring you to be looked upon as the most profligate of Messalinas. Now, then—you know the nature of the warfare which I am resolved to wage. I give you one fortnight to deliberate: and, if by mid-day on the second Wednesday from this date, I do not receive a favourable letter from you, I will at once enter without pity and without remorse upon this tremendous crusade which I have shadowed out for your contemplation."

The Colonel ceased—and stood with folded arms in the presence of Venetia Trelawney. His countenance was deadly pale—his lips were ashy white and quivering: it was evident that he was both astonished and alarmed at his own immense audacity in the part to the full performance of which he had worked himself up. His whole appearance was that of a coward whom circumstances have for the moment imbued with the courage of desperation, but who can still scarcely believe that he has actually and positively done the deed the effect of which he pauses to contemplate.

But how had Venetia Trelawney received that matchless outpouring of scoundrelism—that atrocious complication of diabolical menaces? At first she had listened in cold contempt—then with fiery indignation—then with superb disdain—next in utter amazement—and lastly with haughty defiance: but never for a single moment with fear or dismay. Nothing could exceed the perfect grandeur of her beauty as she stood gazing in silence, but collectedly and undauntedly, upon that man who had developed by degrees the sneaking paltriness of his disposition, and had attained a climax of villany by a rapid transition into the character of a cowardly ruffian.

"And now, sir," said Venetia, in a voice that trembled not and with looks that quailed not, although with heightened colour upon her cheeks,—"and now, sir, suppose that I went straight to Lady Wenlock and detailed to her, word for word, all that has emanated from your lips?"

"No, Miss Trelawney—no—you will not do it," returned Malpas, with another sardonic sneer. "A weak-minded, timorous, hysterical woman would adopt that course: but you are strong-minded, and will act with greater prudence. Because Lady Wenlock would not believe you: she could not possibly fancy that I am such a dastard—such a wretch—such a miscreant. You see that I know how to speak of my own conduct in befitting terms? Well, then—you yourself are aware that Lady Wenlock would treat your tale as an illusion—an impossibility. I should deny it indignantly—I should appeal to those who have known me for years——And then again," added the Colonel, with a smile of self-sufficiency and confidence, "the whole thing would sound so remarkably improbable——"

"Enough, sir—we will not protract this discourse unnecessarily," said Venetia, who had all along recognised the truth of the arguments thus insolently adduced, but who still did not choose to let it appear that she really saw their force. "I will tell you frankly and candidly that, woman though I am, I have courage and energy enough to treat your conduct—your bearing—even your menaces, in the only manner which is suitable to the occasion—namely, with contempt. You are right, therefore, in supposing that I shall forbear from what you choose to denominate *a scene*: and indeed, I should be especially loth to mar the pleasure which the excellent Lady Wenlock experiences in giving this entertainment. But you and I, sir, will part here—at once—and without another word. You can return in that direction," she added, pointing towards the mansion,—"while I hasten to rejoin my friends who are by this time at the end of the avenue."

"But do not mistake me, Miss Trelawney," said Colonel Malpas,—"nor treat my words lightly. Be mine—or I will perform all that I have threatened!"

And, darting upon her a look of mingled menace and misgiving,—for the reaction towards alarm at what he had done was even already taking place in his dastard mind,—he hurried along the avenue in the direction which she had indicated.

During the latter portion of the somewhat exciting scene which we have just described, Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter Penelope had walked on, without once looking behind them, to the end of the avenue;—and there they had seated themselves in a delicious arbour, where a table was spread with fruits, wine, cakes, and a varied assortment of light refreshments.

On separating from Colonel Malpas in the manner just recorded, Venetia was about to hasten along the avenue to rejoin her friends: but scarcely had the cowardly bully dashed away from her, when she was startled by a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens as if some one were forcing his way through them. She paused to look in the direction whence the sounds came;—and in another moment a tall stout man, with enormous black whiskers, emerged from the bushes and stood before her.

"Hush, ma'am—hush!—not a word, if you please," he immediately said, in a low, hurried, and mysterious tone. "I've overheard all that has passed—and if you want a witness at any time——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Venetia, as if suddenly struck by the importance of the proposal thus made her: "and to whom am I indebted——"

"Hush, ma'am, hush—not a word—for I am only an interloper here," said the whiskered stranger. "But if you want to see me—and perhaps it would be as well, for more reasons than one—you can send me a message or a note, and I shall not fail to attend your summons. Here's my card."

Thus speaking, the individual thrust a somewhat dingy morsel of pasteboard into Miss Trelawney's hand;—and without even waiting for a reply, he plunged amidst the bushes and disappeared from her view.

For a moment she stood undecided how to act: then glancing at the name and address which were printed upon the card, she placed it in her bosom and hurried along the avenue to rejoin her friends.

In the meantime dancing had commenced on the lawn in front of the mansion; and by the glare of the illumination the scene was brilliant and exciting. In another part of the grounds there was a splendid display of fireworks; and presently Venetia Trelawney, accompanied by Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope, retraced their way from the avenue and mingled with the crowd of guests who were gathered in the vicinage of the pyrotechnic exhibition.

"My dear Miss Trelawney," exclaimed Lady Wenlock, suddenly accosting her, "how is it that you are alone? Where is the Colonel? And will you not dance? There are numbers of gentlemen dying for the honour of being introduced to you——"

"I thank your ladyship," said Venetia, acknowledging the well-meant courtesy with a gracious smile,—"but I am somewhat indisposed this evening, and with your permission must retire shortly. As for Colonel Malpas, to whose care you so kindly entrusted us—we have by some accident separated from him——"

"Ah! in the rush to see the fireworks," exclaimed the good-natured hostess, little suspecting how serious a scene had taken place. "But you really cannot think of departing yet awhile? The recreations and amusements of the evening have only just commenced. Come, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, join your influence to mine—and Miss Penelope also—and let us induce Miss Trelawney to stay a little longer."

"It would be discourteous and ungrateful in the extreme to persist in leaving after your kind persuasion for me to remain," said Venetia: for she had not only conceived a sort of affection for the excellent-hearted Lady Wenlock, but she also saw that Penelope was anxious to stay.

"Now this acquiescence with my desire I look upon as a personal favour to myself," exclaimed Lady Wenlock: "for you will excuse an old woman like me telling you that you are the star of the assembly. But you will dance, will you not?—and you also, Miss Penelope?—Stay—I must seek you suitable partners."

And away bustled the well-meaning hostess, disappearing amidst the crowds of guests: but in a few minutes she returned, accompanied by two elegantly dressed and handsome young gentlemen—one of whom, the Honourable George Macnamara,

she introduced to Miss Trelawney—and the other, Lieutenant Apsley of the Guards, she presented to Miss Arbuthnot. The gentlemen requested the ladies' hands for the ensuing dance—the favour was awarded—and the two couples took their places in the quadrille that was formed upon the grass-plat.

Venetia found her partner tolerably agreeable—at all events, unassuming and well bred: and she entered with much spirit into the excitement of the dance. Her extraordinary beauty had already attracted universal admiration: but now the elegance and grace of her movements as she floated through the figures of the quadrille, rivetted all eyes upon her. When the quadrille was over, her hand was solicited for the next one by numerous aspirants for that honour;—and she continued to dance until past midnight, to the infinite joy of Lady Wenlock who more than once accosted her with whispered congratulations on having made herself so agreeable.

The saloons of the mansion were now thrown open for supper; and Venetia consented to remain a little longer. Lady Wenlock placed her on her right hand and bestowed the kindest attentions upon her: and at length, when Miss Trelawney rose to retire, the worthy hostess took an opportunity to whisper hurriedly in her ear, "My charming friend, I hope that you will henceforth look upon me as something more than a mere acquaintance." Venetia pressed the old lady's hand with grateful fervour: and hurrying away, she took the arm of the Honourable George Macnamara who was waiting to escort her to her carriage.

We should observe that from the moment Venetia parted from Colonel Malpas in the avenue, she beheld him no more throughout the rest of the evening. The Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were not present at the festival at all: and thus, after the scene with the Colonel, Venetia was not tormented by any of the suitors who were bent upon her conquest. The noblemen and gentlemen with whom she had danced, and whom Lady Wenlock had introduced to her at the supper-table, were therefore all new acquaintances;—and every one of them returned home completely ravished with the beauty and charmed with the conversation of the elegant and handsome Miss Trelawney.

But what thought Venetia herself of all this triumph which her loveliness had achieved, and of the homage and adulation which had been paid her,—what thought she, we say, of all this as she rode home with Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope? She was silent and dispirited: every now and then a sigh which she endeavoured to subdue, made her bosom heave;—and she thought more of that hurried sentence of whispered kindness on Lady Wenlock's part, than of all the fine compliments and adulatory language that had been breathed in her ears by the lips of elegant youths and titled aristocrats.

CHAPTER XX

THE GREEN-BAIZE CHAMBER

On this same Wednesday night of the festival at Lady Wenlock's mansion at Kew, another episodical incident belonging to our tale took place in respect to Louisa Stanley.

It was eleven o'clock on that same Wednesday night; and the hapless young maiden sate, the picture of woe, in the chamber to which she had been so mysteriously conveyed on the preceding evening.

Throughout the day she had seen no one but the serious-looking elderly female who attended upon her, and from whom she vainly sought an explanation of the outrage which had been thus perpetrated towards her. The woman had brought her in her repasts, which consisted of delicacies and were served up with silver plate: and on several other occasions during the day had she looked into the chamber to inquire whether Louisa wanted anything. But a negative was invariably given by the afflicted young lady, who also left the food untasted;—and if the elderly attendant essayed to console her, Louisa's only response was, "Tell me where I am—give me my liberty—or explain to me wherefore I am imprisoned here: otherwise you will see me perish with grief, or go mad with despair!"

To these adjurations, delivered with impassioned manner and wild voice, the female invariably answered to the effect that Miss Stanley had nothing to fear, but that she must not expect to receive those explanations which she sought until her mind was composed and the agitation of her feelings was subdued.

Perceiving, therefore, that she could glean nothing from this woman, Louisa did not encourage her presence in the room: the unhappy maiden preferred being alone, so that she might look her wretched position in the face—plunge into conjectures as to the author and the motive of her captivity—and rack her brain with plans for effecting her escape.

But let us pause to describe with precision the chamber in which she was immured. We have stated in an earlier chapter that it was small but well furnished, and that the walls were covered with a green baize. A closer examination showed that this baize was thickly wadded—or rather, that between it and the wall there was a compact stuffing of wool. This was ascertained by pressing with the hand on any part of the baize; and the object of such an arrangement could only be to prevent the escape of any sounds from within, and to beat back all sounds from without. Thus any horror—any atrocity—any cruelty might be perpetrated in this terrible chamber, without a chance of the victim's shrieks or cries being heard beyond those walls: while, on the other hand, no noise on the outside—no rattle of vehicles, if there were any—no striking of a clock, if any church were near,—no sound, in fine, whatsoever, could reach the ear of the captive and afford a clue to the whereabouts of the dwelling that contained this dreadful room.

Facing the couch were heavy draperies, reaching from a brass rod near the ceiling to the carpet

which their massive fringes swept. When these curtains were drawn aside, a window appeared, it was true,—but a window defended with massive iron bars, and looking only into another room, and not upon the open air. This other room had a conical skylight on the roof: but an inner range of glass was set in the circular aperture above which the skylight rose—and thus every precaution was taken to deaden, or rather hush and stifle any sounds either from within or from without.

When Louisa had awoke in the morning, after a few hours of restless and troubled sleep, the light had burnt out: but the woman, who had already entered the chamber, had drawn back the window-curtains—and the lustre of day, having first to penetrate through the double panes of the skylight in the next room, shone with only the dimness of a funereal gloom into the captive's chamber. Then, as to the doors, the idea which had struck Louisa on the previous evening was confirmed by the morning's close investigation: for she found that the inner door was covered with baize and stuffed like the walls—and whenever the elderly female made her appearance, an outer door was first unbolted and opened before this inner one moved upon its hinges. There were consequently two doors—thus completing and perfecting all those arrangements which had been so artfully contrived to render the chamber impervious to all sounds from without as well as to prevent the escape of even the shrillest shriek or the most piercing cry from within.

At least, such were the impressions which the construction of this terrible room made upon the mind of the unfortunate Louisa Stanley when she had by degrees ascertained all the particulars and details we have just recorded. And, Oh! there was something horribly foreboding—something hideously frightful in the mere sense of being held captive in such a chamber as this! It seemed as if the object and intent were to immure the victim in a living tomb—to separate her altogether from the world—to reserve her for some doom which would inevitably goad her to a desperation or an agony the shrieks and cries of which it was necessary to stifle and subdue!

But of what nature could this doom be? The mind of Louisa Stanley was too innocent and her imagination too pure to allow her to comprehend at the first glance the possibility of that extreme to which the abominable passions and burning lusts of man will sometimes hurry him. She was so utterly ignorant of the wild license of desire and the rabid frenzy of lascivious yearnings, that it was long ere a suspicion of the real cause of her captivity stole into her mind: and thus throughout the long, long day had she vainly tortured her imagination with conjectures relative to the object of her imprisonment and the author of the outrage.

That day had passed amidst alternations of wild grief and profound despondency—harrowing reflections and blank despair—torrents of tears and intervals of deliberate meditation. The evening had come—a lamp was placed upon the table by the elderly attendant—and the curtains of the window were once more drawn. The supper-tray was left in case she should choose to break her fast—for she had eaten nothing the whole day: but the woman had left her for the night—and Louisa only knew the hour because the attendant had told her that it was near eleven when she thus took leave of her until the morrow.

Pale—with dishevelled hair—and disordered apparel, sate the maiden in her prison-chamber. There was a wildness in her eyes which denoted an incipient frenzy of the brain;—and yet she pressed her hand to her throbbing brows in the hope of steadying her thoughts. She must escape—Oh! she must escape! But how?—where were the means?—in which direction lay an avenue of egress from that dreadful room?

Suddenly, and as if by inspiration, she remembered her adventure some weeks previously with the Reverend Bernard Audley, the Canon of Canterbury Cathedral. The recollection seemed to flash to her mind in the same way as a gleam of a lamp all in an instant discloses the aspect of some dark and unknown cavern. The strange proceeding of the Canon on that occasion appeared to connect itself with this terrible misfortune which had overtaken her. At first she essayed to discard the thought as involving an impossibility. It seemed so utterly improbable that a minister of the Gospel would act in such a manner towards a defenceless girl. But the suspicion grew upon her: some secret voice whispered in the depths of her soul that her conjectures had fallen into the right channel;—and gradually, gradually did a light dawn in upon her hitherto unsophisticated mind, leading her to a sort of glimmering notion of the probability that the Canon was enamoured of her and had adopted the present means of making her his own.

Now that her speculations as to the author and the cause of her captivity had at length settled into a definite idea, she was relieved of much of the anguish of suspense on the one hand, although her terrors were grievously augmented on the other. For she now pictured to herself a lengthened captivity: she fancied, in her artless innocence, that the Reverend Bernard Audley purposed to enforce her consent to become his wife;—and although her suspicions had travelled thus far, she did not dream that any darker and deeper outrage could be meditated against her. Her purity of soul raised a barrier to the progress of her ideas when they had reached a certain point; but the apprehension of a forced marriage with Bernard Audley was still enough to overwhelm with despair the heart that was filled with the image of Jocelyn Lofius.

But she was now, if possible, more than ever animated with the idea of escape: and this fervid longing—this profound yearning to free herself from so shocking a captivity, became enhanced into a hope that she would succeed in her endeavour. Rising from her seat, she hurriedly arranged her dishevelled hair and her disordered dress—and then once more began narrowly and closely to scrutinize every feature of the chamber. While she was thus engaged, a thought struck her. If so much precaution had been adopted to make the walls impervious to all sounds, either from within or from without, it was fair to infer that in the absence of these precautions such sounds would have free ingress. In other words, if she were now to raise an alarm, the baize and the wool-wadding would deaden it: but if the baize and the wool-wadding were removed, her screams would perhaps bring succour to her aid.

She resolved therefore to tear away the barrier

which seemed intended to confine the voice of anguish to within those four walls: and she reflected that even if she should fail in attaining her aim, the circumstances of her captivity could not be rendered worse. At all events she was resolved to make the attempt and abide the issue, whatever it should be: and her mind being thus made up, she found herself animated with a degree of courage and hope that enabled her to commence her task with an energy exceeding her expectations.

We have already observed that the supper-tray was left in the chamber: and to this circumstance was Louisa indebted for the means of carrying out her design. Taking up the knife, she proceeded to cut away the baize from the wall; and, as she had already suspected, she found a thick inner coating of compressed woollen wadding. The task was comparatively an easy one: and in half-an-hour she had cut away and torn down the baize and the lining from the whole of the lower part of one side of the room. The chamber was strewn with the fragments—a cloud of dust filled the place—and Louisa paused to drink a large draught of water to cool her parched throat.

Having rested for a few minutes, the persevering girl returned to her task, and began the work of demolition on that side of the room against which the head of the couch stood. But she had not long toiled in this quarter, when she perceived a door set in the wall, and hitherto covered over with the green baize. A brighter gleam of hope than that which had just inspired her, now shot athwart her brain: and seizing the lamp, she examined the door with mingled eagerness and suspense. It was fastened: but the lock was on the side which she was thus contemplating;—and although the key was not there, she still saw a possibility of opening the door by unscrewing the lock itself. This she succeeded in accomplishing by means of the knife—though not without bruising and cutting her delicate fingers.

Scarcely had she removed the last screw of the lock, when the sound of a church-clock striking the hour, reached her ears. She paused and listened. Counting the strokes, she ascertained that it was midnight: and then she suddenly recollected that the tones of the bell, which from the first had seemed familiar to her, were those of Canterbury Cathedral!

She was therefore a captive in the immediate vicinage of this sacred edifice: and this discovery confirmed her suspicion that she was in the house of the Reverend Bernard Audley! But the sound of that bell had also ratified another idea which she had formed—namely, that by the removal of the lining of the walls, no obstruction would exist to the ingress or egress of such sounds as are loud enough to penetrate ordinary barriers of brick and mortar.

But Louisa did not waste in mere reflection that time every moment of which was so valuable for positive action. She had removed the locks—she could open the door. It yielded to her hand; and, taking the light with her, she hastened to ascertain whither this channel of communication led. Proceeding cautiously, but with a suspense so painful that the beatings of her heart were clearly audible, she passed from the dismantled chamber of her captivity into a large place totally unfurnished and resembling a loft. Then she recollected that the floor on which these apartments were situated must be at the top of the house, inasmuch as there was a sky-light on the ceiling of the room into which the barred casement of the green-baize chamber looked.

Traversing the loft with noiseless step, she reached a rude staircase, which she descended: and at the bottom she found herself on a small landing where there were three doors. She now took off her shoes in order that she might continue her way even more stealthily than at first: and as the stairs which she next descended were carpetted, her tread was light and aerial as that of a spirit.

All was still throughout the house: had a pin dropped, she would have heard it. In a few moments she reached another landing, where there were also three doors: but they were closed—and not a sound, not a voice, came from within either of the rooms to which these doors belonged. On this landing there was a window—and Louisa paused for a moment to look out. Holding the lamp within the shade off the wall, and lifting the blind, she gazed forth. The night was beautiful and star-lit—and in front of the casement a huge black mass of building stretched right and left. Louisa instantaneously recognised the cathedral:—and all doubt, even if any had remained in her mind, now vanished as to the fact that she was in the large and gloomy dwelling of the Reverend Bernard Audley.

Slowly replacing the blind, the maiden continued her way down the last flight of stairs: but scarcely had she come within sight of the hall at the bottom, when she was struck with mingled terror and despair on observing a light streaming from a room the door of which stood partially open. A sense of utter annihilation of all hope seized upon her with a force that was almost overwhelming: but repressing the ejaculation that rose to her lips and gathering all the elements of her scattered courage, she resolved to continue her way.

Her step was noiseless as she descended the few remaining stairs leading down into the hall. Thence there was a stair-case to the kitchen: but if the servants had not yet retired to rest, Louisa could scarcely hope for safe egress in that direction. Besides, she was not sure that there was any means of issue from those lower regions at all. What was she to do? The front door of the house was before her—at a distance of only a few yards: but in order to reach it she must pass by the room-door that stood open and whence the light issued. Delay, however, was dangerous: hesitation could not do otherwise than increase the perils which environed her!

She accordingly resolved to try the venture by the front door. Placing the lamp upon the stairs, and still carrying her shoes in her hand, she advanced with the lightness of a sylph. Her step was noiseless upon the cold marble—her dress rustled not. She passed the door that stood open and flung a rapid and frightened glance into the room. The Canon of Canterbury Cathedral was seated at a table, on which were wine decanters, glasses, and dishes of fruit. He was reading—and his face was flushed with drinking.

All this Louisa saw at a glance: and, unobserved by the Reverend Bernard Audley, she passed on,

and reached the front door. But to her dismay, she found it locked—and the key was not there!

With a sickening sensation at the heart and a cold tremor passing all over her, she felt as if she were about to faint. But once again summoning all her presence of mind to her aid, she revolved in an instant the only alternatives that now lay before her. One was to throw herself at the Canon's feet and demand his mercy: the other was to descend into the lower regions of the establishment in the hope of finding a means of egress. She decided upon this latter course—because, if it failed, it would then be time to appeal to the Reverend Bernard Audley, or else endeavour to raise an alarm by shrieks and cries.

Once more traversing the hall, and passing unperceived by the door of the parlour in which the clergyman was seated with his book and his wine, Louisa resumed possession of the lamp and descended the kitchen stairs. Not a sound was heard—not a voice met her ears; and she felt assured that the servants must have retired to rest. This she considered to be the more probable on account of the lateness of the hour.

On reaching the bottom of the stairs, she paused and listened. Then, as the silence remained unbroken, she began to explore the basement-premises of the building. Advancing a few steps—then pausing to listen—then advancing again—now trembling all over—then with suspended breath and upheaved bosom,—now shading the light with her hand—then holding it high up to throw its beams forward,—thus was it that the maiden passed through an infinity of anxieties and alarms, all in the space of a few short minutes.

She had the satisfaction, however, of becoming assured that the servants had retired to rest: and her search was presently rewarded by the discovery of a door leading into a yard at the back of the house. But scarcely had she opened this door, when

at the very instant she was about to cross the threshold, she heard the sounds of footsteps in the hall above. The blood congealed in her veins: and transfixed to the spot with dire terror, she listened almost in a statue-like state of suspended animation. But in a few moments she was relieved from that anguish of terror, by the certainty that the Rev. Bernard Audley, whose steps she had heard, was ascending the stairs from the hall.

"Now, young beauty—now, sweet and ravishing, lovely and enchanting Louisa——"

These were the words which he spoke aloud, as he began the ascent of the stairs, and which reached the ears of the trembling maiden below. She paused to listen no longer: but, wild with new terrors, she rushed from the doorway—sprang across the yard—and stopped only when she found herself close by an open arch in the massive wall of the Cathedral, There she was recalled to herself—for she was well enough acquainted with the interior of the sacred edifice to perceive in a moment that this open archway led into the vast subterranean, or crypt, of the venerable cathedral.

This immense assemblage or succession of vaults extends under nearly half of the spacious structure, and is lighted in the day-time by a few arched windows and loop-holes on a level with the ground. From one or two of these the panes, shafts, and bars are broken away; and thus any one who gains ingress to the cathedral precincts, may steal through these dismantled apertures into the crypt. But there is no similar means of egress in any other part: and thus Louisa knew well that even if she entered the crypt by the archway now before her, she must remain in the subterranean until the doors of the church should be opened in the morning.

Shuddering at the idea of passing the rest of the night in that place of sepulchral gloom, the maiden threw her eyes hastily around the yard to ascertain if there were no other avenue of escape: but she could see none. And now it suddenly struck her that as the Canon ascended the stairs of his house, if he only happened to look forth from the landing-window,—the same whence she had so recently beheld the Cathedral's black mass stretching before her view,—he could not fail to observe the light which she carried in her hand. She therefore hesitated no longer—but boldly, or rather desperately, entered the low arch and in a few moments was in the vast subterranean.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRYPT.

Hurrying away from the spot where she had thus entered the gloomy place, she plunged farther into the crypt—passed by pillar after pillar—and at length sank exhausted upon a mass of stone-work at the base of one of the low columns supporting the roof.

Standing the lamp upon the ground, she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. The prolonged excitement which she had endured, from the first moment when she commenced the task of tearing away the green baize in her prison-chamber, until she thus sate down in the vaulted subterranean of the cathedral, — this prolonged excitement, we say, which had wrung her heart's chords to their utmost powers of tension, now gave way in a passionate flood of weeping.

But these tears relieved her: they afforded a channel for the issue and flow of her pent-up feelings;—and presently wiping her eyes, she was enabled to fix her thoughts once more upon the circumstances of her position.

She knew that at an early hour in the morning the persons having charge of the cathedral would open the doors not only of the nave and choir alone, but also of the crypt, inasmuch as the edifice was daily inspected by visitors. She could then easily find an opportunity of passing out unobserved and unquestioned, even if she did not choose to relate the outrage which had been perpetrated upon her liberty and whence she had escaped. But on the other hand, if in the meantime the Canon should discover her flight from the baize-chamber and should track her into the crypt, she would be as much in his power as ever. And those words which she had heard him utter as he ascended the stairs of his house—what did they mean?—what portent did they shadow forth? He had said, "*Now*, young beauty,"—the monosyllable "*now*" being spoken emphatically, as if he meant something at that moment. Louisa shuddered as she thus reflected upon his words and wondered what their significancy could be: and she began to entertain some vague and undefined suspicion that he possibly harboured intentions more vile and dreadful than any she had previously conceived.

Scarcely had this thought struck her, when she was startled by the sounds of footsteps echoing through the vaulted subterranean. She sprang from her seat: like a carved effigy of mingled terror and despair did she stand against the pillar;—and with eyes dilated wildly, lips apart, and distended neck, she listened as if life or death depended upon the issue. All was still—and she began to breathe again. With long heavings and deep sinkings, her fair bosom denoted the return of that animation which had been as it were suspended throughout the rest of her frame to be all condensed in the faculty of hearing. But ere the tide of life had again obtained full play in its crimson channels, those ominous sounds once more reached her ears: once more, also, was she transfixed—petrified—turned into a statue with the spell of dread consternation.

Again however all was still—but her imagination was now so fearfully excited and her brain so troubled, that she began to conjure up all kinds of horrible shapes and spectral forms. From the ground appeared to rise those ghastly shapes,—some dressed in their grave-clothes—others wearing the garb of priests,—some appearing to be only skeletons wrapped in the loose garments of the dead—and others looking like grim warriors in their steel panoply. Whichever way she cast her eyes around, objects of terror seemed to encounter them; and those spectral shapes increased in number until the whole crypt appeared to be crowded with them. But suddenly the immense array of phantoms melted into thin air—and one tall dark form stood forth from behind an adjacent pillar.

"My brain is reeling—and yet 'tis all a delusion—and I know it!" exclaimed Louisa aloud, as she closed her eyes and pressed her fingers upon her

throbbing brows: then opening her eyes again, she gave vent to a piercing shriek as she beheld the Minor Canon standing before her.

"Silly maiden, what a foolish course have you pursued!" said the Reverend Bernard Audley, adopting his most soothing tone and conciliating manner—for by Louisa's flight the affair had taken a turn which he had little anticipated and which to a certain degree had deranged his plans.

She did not however hear the words which he had just addressed to her. Overcome with terror and dismay at finding herself once more, as she feared, in the hands of her persecutor, she had sunk against the pillar to which she was now clinging for support: and although she fainted not, nor fell senseless—yet was there a confusion in her thoughts and a hurry in her brain that subdued the natural working of her faculties and made her feel as if she were under the influence of a strange and incomprehensible dream.

We will here pause for a moment to give a few necessary explanations relative to the conduct and intentions of the Minor Canon. He had bribed certain gipsies to carry off Louisa; and he had ordered them to manage the abduction in such a manner that she might not know to whose house she was taken, nor in what part of Canterbury it was situated. Hence the circuitous route followed by the vehicle on the preceding evening. When once safe in his hands, the infamous parson scrupled not how he should behave towards her; and in his housekeeper, who was known as Mrs. Dorothy, he had a willing instrument and efficient auxiliary. The wine and the malt liquour which accompanied the dinner-tray that was carried up to Louisa's room, were both drugged: but fortunately the young lady partook of nothing at the time. The coffee served up to her at tea-time, was also drugged: but again she escaped the snare by declining any refreshment. The third experiment was made with the wine and the malt liquor which were placed upon the supper-tray: and Mrs. Dorothy reported to her master that "she felt sure the young girl would take either a glass of wine or ale, as she was now evidently worn out and thoroughly exhausted." In this hope was it that the supper-things had been left in the baize-chamber: but we have seen that Louisa only partook of a draught of the spring-water, which it was impossible to drug. The Minor Canon, however, relied upon his housekeeper's assurance, and sate up with the intention of waiting until the drugged liquor should have taken the hoped-for effect upon the maiden. He accordingly sate up, inflaming his imagination with wine and with some voluptuous romance, until his passions became ungovernable. He then ascended to the baize-chamber, in the expectation of beholding his victim stretched upon the couch in a profound lethargy;—and it was when about to mount the stairs that he had given utterance to the words which had fallen so ominously on Louisa's ears and subsequently struck her with so dubious a meaning. But his rage on reaching the room and beholding the evidences of her escape, may be better imagined than described: and his terror was even greater than his fury.

Yes—his alarm was more poignant than his disappointment. For had he succeeded in making himself the master of her person when under the influence of a narcotic, he would have had her transported back to her own cottage-garden ere daybreak, and while still steeped in lethargy. She would then have remained in ignorance whither she had been taken, and who was the author of the outrage. If her suspicions fell upon him, his character for sanctity and excellent reputation would at once give the lie to the imputation;—and his housekeeper, to avoid being recognised by the young lady, might easily visit London, or go elsewhere for a short time.

Such was the plan which the Reverend Bernard Audley had deeply meditated—darkly resolved—and confidently hoped to carry out successfully. But Louisa's flight not only upset all his calculations and baffled his sensual hopes, but suddenly defeated all his precautions, and raised up a thousand dangers around him. For, of course, she had discovered, or must eventually discover, from whose house it was that she had thus fled: and to be enabled to speak with certainty on the point, and give circumstantial details of the mode of her flight and the exact route taken, would inevitably establish the truth of her tale beyond all possibility of contradiction.

Such were the reflections which swept through the mind of the Reverend Bernard Audley as he hastened in pursuit of the fugitive maiden. The door of the loft being left open, convinced him that she must have descended the stairs; and the door leading into the yard being also wide open, furnished another clue to her progress. That she had entered the crypt was the next idea that struck him; and thither he accordingly followed her, with the success which has already been described.

"Silly maiden—what a foolish course you have pursued!" were the words which he addressed to her in a conciliatory tone: but she heard them not, and only gazed on him with mingled wildness and vacancy as she clung to the pillar.

The dim light of the lamp revealed to his eyes the marble pallor of her lovely countenance—while his own features were alike flushed with drinking and agitated with evil passions.

"Maiden, do you hear me?" he said, grasping her wrist.

"Unhand me, sir!" she cried, now suddenly startled by that touch into a full recollection of all that had occurred and an acute sense of her present position.

"Louisa, Louisa," exclaimed the Reverend Bernard Audley, "I beseech you to hear—and to forgive me," he added, with a tone and manner of well-assumed meekness.

"You have no doubt behaved very wickedly towards me, sir," replied the maiden: "but if you sincerely and earnestly express your contrition——"

"By heaven! I regret what I have done," he exclaimed; "and you must attribute it to that boundless affection with which you have inspired me. Come—return with me into my house—I promise you honourable and safe escort on my part to the front door——"

"No, sir—no!" ejaculated Louisa, a sudden presentiment inspiring her with the dread that he was deceiving her: then, as the deepening flush upon his cheeks and the confusion of his looks at once ratified the suspicion, she said, "I will remain here until the morning—and if you dare to harm me, I will send forth such piercing cries as shall arouse the whole neighbourhood."

"Foolish girl!" thundered the Minor Canon, assuming an air of diabolical menace,—"you will force me to extremes! Look around you—behold the utter loneliness of this place. No human eye witnesses us: but how many spectral forms and invisible phantoms may be looking forth upon us from amidst the dense obscurity of these vaulted regions and the black darkness of its remotest nooks. Now, Louisa, Louisa—you behold before you a desperate man! His honour—his fame—his character—almost his very life—these are in your hands: and unless you kneel and swear by the great God who rules in heaven—by the shades of the departed monks and warriors whose remains lie buried beneath our feet or entombed in the cloisters overhead—by all your hopes of happiness in this world and of salvation in the next;—unless, I say, you kneel and swear by all these that you will never reveal to a living soul aught of what has occurred to you in my house or at my hands——"

"No, no—I cannot take that oath!" interrupted Louisa, whose blood had run cold at the terms in which it was couched. "Besides, I will deal frankly with you—there is one to whom I must, for my own sake, reveal all that has occurred: otherwise I could not account for my absence from home, of which he must inevitably hear on his return to Canterbury——"

"Ah! you allude to Jocelyn Loftus—my rival in your love?" muttered the Minor Canon, with a terrible scowl of hatred: then, subduing his bitter feelings—or rather the outward manifestation of them—as well as he was able, he added, "But is it absolutely necessary for you to make him your confidant in this respect? What purpose will it serve to excite his angry feelings against me?—what good will it achieve to unsettle his mind with rancorous thoughts and vindictive emotions? Remember, young lady, that wherever a battle is to be fought, two must fight it—and that he whose cause is most just and who wins the day, does not always come off scatheless himself."

"Nevertheless," observed Louisa, her courage reviving since she beheld a disposition on the part of the Canon to become the suppliant and to back his proposals of compromise by means of a sophistry which betrayed even to her inexperienced comprehension the alarm that really lurked at the bottom of his mind,—"nevertheless," she said, "I must deal frankly and candidly with Mr. Loftus, be the consequences what they may. At the same time," she added almost immediately, "I think I can undertake to promise that he will forbear from any course which may tend to give publicity to this wicked outrage, provided you——"

"Oh! now you are dictating conditions to me, girl!" exclaimed the Canon, flying into an ungovernable passion. "By heaven! I will sacrifice you to my safety—aye, and to my vengeance also—unless you take the oath which I have already prescribed! Yes—and without reserve or exception, I say," he added, ferociously. "Down—down—upon your knees, insolent girl—down, I command you——"

His looks were terrible with the rage and fury of a desperate man—the foam of a species of hydrophobic madness was upon his lips—and if he stopped short in the midst of his fiercely uttered words, it was not because he had nothing more to say, but because his throat grew so suddenly parched and his tongue so hot that he gasped and panted violently.

Louisa's firmness abandoned her in a moment: she was appalled and horror-stricken;—and sinking upon her knees, she raised her clasped hands and lifted her dilated eyes, exclaiming, "Mercy! mercy!"

"I will show no mercy—I can know none!" said the Canon, in a hoarse and ominous voice. "Take the oath which I have dictated—swear to observe an eternal secrecy with regard to the incidents of this night—or——"

"No, no—you may kill me——Oh! you may kill me," shrieked the anguished girl,—"but I will not take that dreadful oath!"

"Then, by heavens! you shall go back to your prison-chamber in my house," exclaimed the Reverend Bernard Audley: "and I will *starve* you into compliance with my wishes—into obedience with my commands!"

And as he thus spoke he sprang forward and wound his arms about the sylphid form of the kneeling girl. A piercing scream burst from her lips: but one of his hands was instantaneously placed upon her mouth—and, despite of her struggles, he was bearing her away from the spot, when a female figure, clothed in black, suddenly appeared from behind the pillars.

"Ah! my evil genius!" ejaculated the Minor Canon—and he let Louisa fall from his arms.

Her forehead struck upon the hard ground—(for the crypt was not paved)—and she instantaneously became insensible.

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When Louisa awoke to consciousness, she was lying undressed in a bed—and a candle was burning in the room.

A crowd of terrible reminiscences rushed into her brain;—and wildly she cast her eyes around her. But all her apprehensions were soothed in a few moments—all her fears were dissipated—when she discovered that she was safe in her own chamber at the cottage. A certain painful sensation on the forehead caused her, however, to lift her hand to her throbbing brow—and her fair fingers encountered a bandage. Ah! then all those terrible reminiscences were not a dream. but everything which now was uppermost in her mind, bore the impress of reality! Her captivity—her flight—the scenes in the cathedral crypt,—all were true:—but how had her deliverance been effected?

While she was yet lost in conjecture, the servant-girl Mary entered the room: and perceiving that her young mistress was awake, she precipitated herself towards her—caught her in her arms—and embraced her with a fervour that evinced the depth and sincerity of her attachment.

"How long have I been here?—and who brought me home?" were Louisa's first questions.

"An hour has elapsed since you were brought back in a deep swoon, Miss," was the reply. "It is now three o'clock in the morning——"

"And my aunt—my poor aunt—how is she?" inquired the maiden, hurriedly.

"As usual, Miss. Of course I have let her want for nothing—I have done my best to attend upon her, although terribly grieved at your absence——"

"And are there any letters, Mary?" demanded Louisa, a gentle blush appearing upon her cheeks which were previously as pale as marble.

"Yes—one, Miss:"—and the servant presented her with the letter, holding the candle near the bed at the same time so as to enable her young mistress to read it.

Louisa instantaneously recognised the handwriting of Jocelyn: and the roseate tinge deepened upon her lovely countenance as she read the following lines:—

"Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, London.
"*Tuesday evening, Sept. 17th.*

"My ever dearest Louisa,

"I have arrived in this great city just in time to save the post with these few words, which I pen for the purpose of convincing you that your loved image is ever uppermost in my thoughts. To-morrow I shall call upon your sister in Stratton Street, and will write to you again. I hope to be able to return to Canterbury on Friday, or Saturday at latest.

"Your sincerely affectionate and faithful
"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

"Dearest Jocelyn!" murmured Louisa to herself, as a thrill of holy ecstacy penetrated her heart: then, placing the letter under her pillow, she said, "And now, Mary, before I give you an account of the causes of my absence, tell me all you may have to communicate. Was not some message delivered to you on Tuesday night to account for my sudden disappearance?—and under what circumstances was I just now brought home again?"

"I will tell you all I know, Miss," returned the faithful and affectionate domestic. "The clock in the kitchen had struck ten on Tuesday evening when I thought that you were staying out a long time in the garden—and I began to fear you would catch cold. I accordingly went out to seek you: but you were nowhere to be found. I was very uneasy, but still fancied that you might have gone out for a walk and strolled farther than usual. Three quarters of an hour passed; and then a strange old crone, looking like a gipsy, called at the gate and said that she had come with a message from Miss Louisa Stanley. I asked her what the message was; and she said you had gone to stay two or three days with some lady-friends of Mr. Loftus, in the neighbourhood of Canterbury, and that there was no cause to be alarmed at your absence. She then hurried away: but I confess that I was by no means satisfied—for I thought this was very unlike your usual conduct, Miss. However, there was no help for it: but I passed a sleepless night. All day yesterday I was still more uneasy—and the longer I thought of your absence and the strange message, the more alarmed I got. When night came again, I could not for the life of me go to bed: I was restless, feverish, and ill. So I sat by the side of your poor aunt, Miss—and then I went down into the kitchen—and everything looked so lonely and dull, I didn't know what to do. It seemed as if there'd been a death in the house. But I won't spin my story out longer than I need. I was sitting by the kitchen fire as the clock struck two—and then I thought that I must go to bed or I should be too ill to-morrow to attend on your aunt. But just as I had come to this determination a carriage drove up to the gate; and I ran out in the hope that you had come back. So you had—but in a deep swoon: and a gentleman and a lady who were inside, told me that you had met with some accident—but I didn't hear exactly what they said, for I was so flurried and frightened to see you in such a state. The lady got out and helped me to carry you up-stairs; and when we had undressed you, she gave gave me a sealed note, saying, '*When your young mistress has recovered her composure, bid her read this.*'—She then went away and returned to the carriage which instantly drove off."

"Where is the note?" inquired Louisa, with mingled curiosity and suspense.

"Here, Miss," said the servant. "I would not give it you at first, till I had told you my story—because from what the lady in black said, I feared it contained something that might ruffle your feelings."

"The lady in black!" echoed Louisa, struck by the reminiscence that it was a female clad in deep mourning who had appeared so suddenly in the crypt.

"Yes—she was a tall lady, dressed in black," answered the servant: "but as she had her veil down, and it was a very thick one, I could not see her face. But her voice was sweet and mild—Oh! so mild, and also so melancholy, that flurried though I was, it quite touched me."

"And the gentleman who was with her in the carriage?" said Louisa, inquiringly.

"Oh! I couldn't see his face at all," was the response. "He remained inside the vehicle—and as it was then quite dark and the moon had gone down, I only saw his figure as one may say—but his voice was agitated and nervous."

Louisa now opened the note which the maid-servant had given her; and she found that it contained the following lines, penned in an elegant female handwriting:—

"The lady who is instrumental in delivering Miss Louisa Stanley from a most outrageous and unjustifiable persecution, ventures to plead on behalf of the offender. She is well aware that Miss Stanley's feelings must be excited to a most painful degree of indignation, and that she will probably deem it her duty to communicate all the facts to those friends on whose counsel she is accustomed to rely. But the writer of this note earnestly implores Miss Stanley not only to deal leniently with the offender, but also to urge her friends to throw the veil of oblivion upon the matter. This is the only reward which the writer seeks or asks for delivering Miss Stanley from a serious danger and restoring her to her home: but she may confidently add that Miss Stanley has no occasion to apprehend a repetition of the outrage, nor any farther molestation or insult from the same quarter."

"This is an appeal to my generosity—and it shall not be made in vain," thought Louisa to herself. "Nevertheless, for my own sake, I must give the fullest explanations to my faithful servant now, and to Jocelyn when he returns. But I will place the seal of silence upon their lips."

Having thus mused upon the course which she should adopt, the young lady proceeded to detail her adventures to the ear of her maid, who was shocked, surprised, and indignant at the treatment to which her beloved mistress had been subjected. She however agreed with Louisa that it would be ungenerous towards the lady in black not to comply with an appeal that was couched in terms of so much delicate earnestness. Secrecy and silence were therefore resolved upon—the more readily, too, inasmuch as the lady's note contained so positive an assurance against any future cause of alarm

As for the blow which Louisa had received from her fall in the crypt, its effect had been rather to stun than injure her: there was a slight abrasion of the skin, and some blood had trickled forth—but there was no fear of any scar remaining to injure her beauty.

CHAPTER XXII.

JACOB'S ISLAND.

At the point where Bermondsey joins Rotherhithe on the bank of the Thames, there is a spot which contains in a very narrow compass all the most frightful elements of crime, demoralization, pauperism, wretchedness, and pestilence. Many vile and miserable neighbourhoods are there in London—many horrible and poverty-stricken districts—many quarters steeped in filth, feculence, and squalor: but, St. Giles's and Saffron Hill—Whitechapel and Bethnal Green—the Almonry of Westminster and the Mint of Southwark,—all these are elysiums and paradises in comparison with Jacob's Island.

For the better comprehension of those readers who are but indifferently acquainted with the topography of this large metropolis, we shall observe that in the south-eastern district there are two immense parishes joining each other, and known as Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. On passing over London Bridge into Southwark, turn to the left—proceed along Tooley Street—and thence may you plunge into all that maze of narrow streets, dirty lanes, and wretched courts which constitute Bermondsey and are prolonged eastward under the name of Rotherhithe. In those districts may be seen the bustle of warehouses mingling with the incessant activity of petty commerce—the huge wain of the wholesale merchant blocking up the narrow thoroughfare against the progress of the costermonger's cart—the important-looking clerk jostling against the small dealer—the creaking crane drawing up immense bales to some well-stored loft, and the light cart delivering in bundles of wood or small packages of grocery at the peddling chandler's shop. But for the most part the houses are poor in appearance—often dilapidated—and dingy, dirty, and uninviting everywhere. Whole streets contain nothing but the poorest, most wretched, and most beggarly shops; while a glance under the arch-ways of the numerous courts causes a shudder to pass over the frame at the bare idea that so many human beings should be compelled to herd together in wretchedness and squalor there.

Such is the general impression made upon the mind by the aspect of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. But bad, unpleasant, and repulsive as these districts are,—in no one respect do they adequately prepare the mind for the loathsome horrors, the hideousness, and the pestilential scenes which are presently to meet the eyes of the individual who explores his way to Jacob's Island.

We have supposed that on leaving London Bridge, you turn into Tooley Street: this is sufficiently broad and open, though dirty and repulsive withal—and a glance into any of the diverging lanes will afford a glimpse of the wretchedness, misery, and squalor that exist behind the lofty warehouses and vast commercial repositories of that thoroughfare. Well, continue your way along Freeschool and Thornton Streets—and you will debouch upon the top of Mill Street. Pause—and look around you! Think of the palaces of Belgravia—and contemplate these dens of wretchedness which now meet your eyes, and where the poor are crammed together as thickly as the herrings in those tubs which you have previously seen in Tooley Street. Think of the mansions of the rich at the West End—and survey the hovels, the courts, and the lanes where all is misery, misery, misery! Remember the fresh air which blows from the green parks into the casements and through the Venetian blinds of the palatial homes of the British aristocracy—and then mark the noxious atmosphere which hangs, dull and stagnant like a plague-mist, upon the neighbourhood which you are exploring.

All this is bad enough, you will say: but it is nothing—absolutely nothing—to what yet remains in the path of your researches. Go on—proceed down Mill Street towards the Thames—and presently you will observe, upon your right hand, a spectacle that must force from your lips an ejaculation expressive of wonderment, horror, and dismay that such a scene should exist in the capital of England and in the middle of the nineteenth century!

But what is this hideous—this appalling—this loathsome scene which you thus behold? It is Jacob's Island.

Hemmed in as it were by warehouses, landing wharves, and other repositories of commerce, this rookery might almost escape the notice of the wanderer in that part of the metropolis, were not his attention especially directed towards it. From the Thames it is screened by the warehouses forming the line called Bermondsey Walk: but on approaching it by way of Mill Street, its horrors and loathsomeness begin to develop themselves to the shocked and disgusted gaze, like some hideous reptile slowly unfolding its slimy folds, while the air feels tainted and sickly with its venomous breath.

Conceive a black ditch, about twenty feet in width, forming a complete quadrangle, with lines of hovels upon the outer banks, and a dense assemblage of similar wretched dwellings on the insulated square within the boundary. Such, in a few words, is Jacob's Island. But not all the languages in the universe can supply terms strong enough to convey an adequate idea of the misery of the place. It must be seen, to be properly understood. The ditch is crossed in several places by means of rotten, ricketty wooden bridges: and to stand upon one of them for only a few moments, is to inhale a noxious vapour which makes the stomach sick and the heart heave. The houses are built partly of brick and partly of wood, and literally seem all tumbling to pieces. They look as if they were about to give way and fall in with one universal smash. The brickwork is so dingy and the woodwork so blackened, that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins: there seems an utter confusion in the architecture and an incomprehensible jumbling of materials.

These hovels have for the most part only one storey above the ground-floor: and the ground-floors themselves are lower than the level of the soil, as if they all sloped towards the ditch which the back rooms overlook. Many of the habitations project over the ditch, and are supported by upright posts, or piles, driven into the dyke's muddy bed: and where the houses are thus arranged, they have small galleries or enclosed places, serving the purpose of back-yards in every possible respect. The general appearance of the place is that of an assemblage of blackened hovels of the most miserable description; and no humane person would consent to allow a favourite dog or cat to harbour there. Yet this district, with its stagnant ditch and its pestilential atmosphere, is swarming with human life—men, women, and children herding

there as in the other poor neighbourhoods of London. Aye—and that ditch, so black in hue and so fetid in odour, is alike their common sewer and the source of the water which they drink: they not only inhale its sickly effluvia, but also imbibe its poisonous draughts. To say after this that it washes their clothes and cooks their food, were to add nothing more horrible—more revolting—more abominable, to the fact already mentioned—namely that it is the only water the poor wretches have to drink!

We have said that the ditch is stagnant—and it is well nigh so: for although there is a means of communication with the Thames, yet this channel is monopolised by a paper-mill, or some manufacturing establishment: and it is only now and then that the river water is allowed to replenish the waste of the black ditch. But were this ditch regularly to empty and refill itself with the ebb and flow of the Thames, it could not possibly be purified: its bed is so deep in mud and slime, that the force of a cataract, and not the languid ebb of a tidal current, would be needed to cleanse the Augean accumulation of filth.

It may be readily understood, from what we have previously stated, that the houses of Jacob's Island are very low: none of the rooms, either on the ground-floor or the upper storey, are high enough for a tall man to stand upright. Few of them have regular staircases: a rude ladder serves in most instances to ascend from below. On entering at the small and narrow street-door, there is a sharp descent in the passage—thus indicating that slope towards the ditch which has already been mentioned.

The inhabitants of Jacob's Island are, as a matter of course, the poorest of the poor—the most wretched of the wretched. Misery and demoralization have made their homes in that appalling spot: pestilence and plague are ever smouldering in that hideous region. Pale, sickly, emaciated women may be seen hanging out their bits of linen and rags of clothes from the windows looking upon the ditch, or else drawing up the slimy water itself in pails or cans which they lower by means of ropes from the overhanging galleries. Famished, wan, and moping children, wasted to skeletons, and whose countenances look deadly white even through the layer of dirt and grime upon them, crawl about in various directions, displaying none of those exuberant spirits which characterise the children of even the poorest persons in other neighbourhoods. Disease has fastened upon their vitals from the moment of their birth: they live in a pestilential atmosphere—they drink poisoned water—and although they may grow up to be men and women, yet will they die prematurely and be laid in early graves. As for the men whom you see in Jacob's Island—they are as miserable in appearance as their wives and their offspring;—and on every countenance may be read the hideous influence of that mephitic vapour which, ever exhaling from the quadrangular ditch, envelopes the whole island in a plague-mist which though unseen is deeply felt.

Oh! when we think that seventy thousand pounds were given a few years back to build stables and kennels for the horses and dogs of Royalty,—and when we reflect that a quarter of that sum would have served to sweep away the whole of Jacob's Island, fill up the loathsome ditch, and build healthy, cheerful, fitting dwellings upon the site of present wretchedness and abominations,—must we not wonder that no voice was raised in the legislative assembly to proclaim the infamy, the scandal, and the atrocity of thus providing handsomely for horses and dogs, while so many human beings were forced by stern compulsion and dire necessity to herd together upon that accursed spot! But what is a poor working man when the whim of Royalty is to be gratified?—what are his pale wife and emaciated children when a German Prince demands that his hunters with which he is afraid to hunt, and his hounds with which he has not skill enough to course, should be royally housed? O Prince Albert! we hope—sincerely hope—that in the Great Exhibition which your princely wisdom has most graciously concocted for 1851, you will not fail to have a model of Jacob's Island placed in some conspicuous part, with three or four *living* specimens of the human beings whom a cruel social system, the pressure of class-interests, and the influence of vile legislation have doomed to pine, languish, rot, and die prematurely, in that most loathsome spot upon the face of the whole earth.

But we will now resume the regular progress of our tale.

The reader will be kind enough to recollect—for it is necessary that we should be particular as to dates—that the festival at Lady Wenlock's at Kew, and the incidents of the baize chamber and the cathedral-crypt at Canterbury, all took place on the Wednesday night. We must therefore observe that it was on this same Wednesday night, or rather at about one o'clock on the Thursday morning,—that the knife-grinder, who has already figured in our narrative, slowly threaded his way along Mill Street towards Jacob's Island. He was as much begrimed with soot and his countenance was as completely disfigured with layers of black, as when we first introduced him to our readers: but he had not his perambulating shop with him on the present occasion.

Advancing along Mill Street in the direction of the Thames, he examined the premises on the right hand side, and in a few minutes turned into a little narrow passage which went shelving down towards the black ditch. It was arched — only just high enough for a man of ordinary stature—and scarcely wide enough for two persons to proceed abreast. It was paved for only the distance of a few feet—and then a flooring of wood suddenly made the knife-grinder aware that a portion of this alley actually overhung the ditch itself. The planks creaked beneath his feet; and on emerging from the passage, he entered upon a ricketty wooden bridge that spanned the dyke: and halting in the middle, he looked over the railings at the houses on his left hand.

The moon, riding high upon the arch of heaven, shone in unclouded splendour; and its beams brought out into full relief that section of Jacob's Island which the knife-grinder now contemplated. Like black marble with a shiny surface, was the stagnant ditch; and the low-pitched houses, with their sombre overhanging galleries, seemed the very places where crime was sure to be committed whenever opportunity might serve—while the deep bed of the dyke appeared only too readily suggestive of the means of disposing of all traces of even the darkest, deadliest deeds. The prospect was sinister in the extreme;—and if the knife-grinder had been a well-dressed person, with a gold chain pendant to his fob, he might have reasonably experienced no small anxiety to escape with all possible speed from such a neighbourhood.

But it was pretty evident that the knife-grinder was no stranger in this spot, and that he was not stand-

ing upon the bridge to contemplate the loathsome scene, but to catch any sounds that might emanate from the nearest house on his left hand. Nor was he disappointed in his expectations: for presently the din of uproarious mirth came vibrating upon his ears; and then, after a temporary lull of a few minutes, a voice was heard singing some flash song.

"Ah! the birds are all there," muttered the knife-grinder to himself. "I wasn't out in my calculation."

With this reflection, he retraced his way off the bridge—threaded the little arched passage once more—regained Mill Street—and knocked at the door of the house the back part of which he had just been watching from the bridge.

"Who's there?" demanded a gruff voice within.

"Tibby Blades, the knife-grinder," was the immediate response.

"Don't know you, my fine feller," returned the gruff voice in-doors. "What do you want?"

"I've got somethink wery particular to say to old Jeremy," was the rejoinder: "and I've been told he's here. That's all."

"Well—wait a minute," said the gruff voice: and the knife-grinder could hear heavy steps retreating along the passage within.

In a very short time, these steps retraced their way to the door, which was opened—and a fierce-looking fellow, with a candle in his hand, appeared just inside the passage. The knife-grinder immediately entered saying in a familiar tone, "Hollos, Mr. Bencull, is this you? How are you?"

The fierce-looking fellow shut the door—drew the bolt very carefully—put up a chain likewise—and then holding up the candle, stared the knife-grinder very hard in the face.

"I don't know you," he at length said in a sullen manner and with evident suspicion. "Where have we met afore?"

"Lor' bless ye, Mr. Bencull," exclaimed the knife-grinder, "such a famous feller as you are ain't unbeknown to even a poor devil like me. I've seen you at several of the flash cribs—Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill—Meg Blowen's in the Almonry—Sharp Mawley's in the Mint—Polly Scratchem's over in Whitechapel——"

"Well, that'll do," growled Mr. Bencull. "It's very clear you know the flash cribs and boozing-kens; but so does a Bow Street runner:"—and again he stared long and hard at the knife-grinder.

"Eh! but a Bow Street runner don't venture down at Mr. Bencull's dark crib in Mill Street, Jacob's Island," was the ready answer given by Tibby Blades the knife-grinder, who stood the savage-looking ruffian's survey without wincing.

"Well, that's true enow," observed Bencull, apparently satisfied and convinced: "cos if a runner or a thief-taker did come here—even if it was the celebrated and skilful Larry Sampson his-self—I'm blowed if he'd ever get out alive. A sharp knife drawn edgewise across the throat—an open window at the back of the house—and the black ditch underneath——by goles! that's the way to dispose of all waggabones of Larry Sampson's description."

"To be sure it is," answered the knife-grinder, again passing triumphantly through the ordeal of a long and searching survey on Mr. Bencull's part. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Sampson wants me for somethink I've done: but blowed if I wouldn't give him a couple of inches of cold steel before he should lay his mawleys on me."

"That's spoken like a man!" exclaimed Bencull, in a more familiar and friendly tone than he had yet adopted towards the knife-grinder. "You'll excuse me, my nibsome pal, for being a trifle suspicious at fust: but them Bow-street chaps does come such cursed rum dodges, you know——"

"Don't say another word about it, there's a fine feller," exclaimed Tibby Blades. "I dare say we shall be tidy friends afore long—when you come to know more of me. Lor' bless yer—there isn't a genelman's butler or footman at any country seat within ten miles round London that I hav'n't made keys for. You understand me?"

"All right!—wide awake!—tip us your mawley, pal," cried Mr. Bencull: then having shaken the knife-grinder by the hand, he said, "And now come along, and I'll introduce you to the company."

Tibby Blades accordingly followed the ruffian into the back room on the ground floor;—and there, by the light of a couple of tallow candles, and through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, were discovered several ill-looking men and two or three women of wanton and dissipated appearance.

"A new friend—Mr. Tibby Blades," exclaimed Bencull, doing the honours of introduction: and as the company felt assured that no one would be admitted unless he was "all right," they forthwith gave the knife-grinder a cordial welcome.

"Now, then, Mr. Bencull," said the new comer, tossing down a few shillings upon the table, "let's have some of your bingo, and bring me a brosely and some bird's-eye."

This figurative language, which meant nothing more nor less than that the knife-grinder proposed to treat the company with some brandy, and required a pipe and tobacco for himself, was instantaneously comprehended by Mr. Bencull, the landlord of the "dark crib:" and the articles thus ordered were forthwith supplied.

"But where's old Jeremy?" demanded Tibby Blades, glancing round upon the company. "I don't see him here?" he added inquiringly.

"He's up-stairs," returned Bencull: "and you can go to him. There—up the ladder—and lift the trap-door."

The knife-grinder, having tossed off a glass of brandy, and with his pipe in his mouth, proceeded to ascend the ladder; and raising the trap at the top, he introduced himself into a room the blackened walls and naked appearance of which were dimly shown by the light of a candle. The whole furniture of the chamber consisted of but a table and a couple of chairs: and it was at this table and in one of those chairs that old Jeremy was seated.

He was a man of about seventy years of age, without a tooth in his head, and with bleared eyes that added to the hideousness of his pale, shrivelled, wrinkled features. He was dressed in a seedy suit of black, and wore a white cravat—thus having the appearance of a decayed undertaker.

Previous to the knife-grinder's entrance into this chamber, old Jeremy was busily employed in examining some watches, rings, snuff-boxes, and other articles of jewellery, all of which were spread out upon the table. These, in fact, were the fruits of the predatory skill of the men and women down stairs;—and old Jeremy, who usually visited the dark crib once a week for the purpose, was putting a value upon the various articles. In plainer terms, he was a notorious "fence," or receiver of stolen goods: and he was now

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testing the gold by means of a chemical fluid, and marking upon a slip of paper the prices at which he proposed to purchase the jewels.

But when Tibby Blades lifted the trap-door, old Jeremy flung his handkerchief over the articles—not because he feared an intruder, but through a habit of precaution that was natural to him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DARK CRIB.

ALMOST immediately after the knife-grinder had ascended the ladder to the room above, another knock was heard at the street door of the house: and the landlord hastened to answer the summons.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Dan'el Coffin," was the immediate response: and the words were followed by a low and peculiar whistle.

"All right," said Bencull in a satisfactory tone: and opening the door, the Hangman entered the place.

"Well, Dan'el, how are you to-night?" inquired the landlord.

"Oh! hearty as a buck. Any company?"

"Yes—a few. But walk in."

Then, having secured the door, Bencull lighted the way into the back room, where Daniel Coffin the Hangman was received with an enthusiastic welcome on the part of the men and women assembled there. Indeed, as he stood in the middle of the room with his hat perched somewhat jauntily upon his head,—and as he surveyed the company to see who were present, and tapped his leg with a stick which he carried in his hand,—he seemed to all intents and purposes a fitting hero for the worship of such a group.

"Well, and how are you all, my pals?" he exclaimed, throwing himself upon a chair, and then coolly tossing off a glass of brandy which stood on the side of the table near him.

"All right, Mr. Coffin," answered one of the women. "Old Jeremy's up-stairs. You know it's his night to be here ——"

"That's just why I've come down to the Island now," observed the Hangman. "I want to see him about some particular business. Is he up-stairs?"

"Yes—but there's a chap with him," said Bencull.

"Oh! well—I can wait awhile—I'm in no hurry—'specially in such sweet company," he added, with a grin at the women, who laughed amazingly at the compliment.

"I dare say the knife-grinder won't be long," remarked Bencull.

"The knife-grinder!" exclaimed the Hangman, catching at the name: for, he remembered what John the footman had told him relative to a worthy of that description, at the *King's Arms*, Richmond, on the preceding night.

"Yes: do you know anythink of him?" inquired Bencull, all his former suspicions instantaneously aroused again.

"Nothing bad, at all events," returned Daniel Coffin: "on the contrary, if it's the same that I mean, he must be a deuced good kind of a chap. But from what I was told, I don't think it is the same, because the one I'm speaking of is wanted in London by the beaks ——"

"And so is this feller," exclaimed Bencull: "he said so to me when he fust entered the crib just now. He says Larry Sampson has got a warrant out against him; but he's blowed if he won't give Larry an inch or two of cold steel afore he'd be lugged off to quod by any such sneaking willain."

"Such a chap, then, would be a welcome recruit for our band," observed Coffin the Hangman. "I wonder what he's up to with old Jeremy? May be something in which we could lend him a little help, and of course go snacks."

"Why don't you step up-stairs and see if there's any way of insinuating yourself into the confidence of this Tibby Blades?" inquired Bencull.

"So I will," returned Daniel the Hangman: and he ascended the ladder accordingly.

Raising the trap-door a little and somewhat cautiously, he beheld the knife-grinder and old Jeremy sitting very close to each other and leaning forward so that there was not an interval of more than three inches between the soot-begrimed countenance of the former and the thin pointed nose of the latter. They were evidently in deep discourse upon some absorbing topic; so much so, that they did not immediately notice the raising of the trap-door.

"May I come up?" asked the Hangman: "or is it anything very particular?"

"Oh! dear, dear—how you've startled me, Daniel!" exclaimed Jeremy, in a nervous, trembling voice. "But come up, my kind and excellent friend," he continued, assuming a bland and coaxing tone: "come up, my dear Daniel. You're the very person I wanted to see: and indeed I was just mentioning your name in the most affectionate terms to my new acquaintance here."

"Mr. Tibby Blades, I understand," said Coffin, as he went up the remaining steps of the ladder and closed the trap behind him. "They told me down stairs who it was you'd got with you. But I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him before: although I'd *heard* of him."

"Heard of me!" exclaimed the knife-grinder. "And yet I haven't made myself wery 'torious in the world yet awhile."

"Wasn't you at Richmond yesterday afternoon, or evening?" inquired the Hangman. "Come—you needn't hesitate about answering—old Jeremy here will tell you I'm all right."

"He's already told me so," observed the knife-grinder; "and therefore I needn't hesitate to say I *was* at Richmond for an hour or so ——"

"Enough, my tulip!" ejaculated Jack Ketch. "Come, tip us your daddle, and we'll be pals. I like the look of you, although ——"

"Although I *am* rayther blackish and sooty—eh?" cried Tibby Blades, with a loud laugh. "Hah! hah! hah! hah!"

"He! he! he!" was the faint and tremulous chuckle, or rather cackle of old Jeremy. "You see, Mr. Blades, we're a merry set—a set of merry dogs, I can assure you. We can laugh at anything and anybody—he! he! he! And here is my dear kind friend Daniel Coffin, who knows I love him as well as if he was my own son," continued the ancient fence, in a whining, canting, snivelling tone of wretched hypocrisy,—"and he'll tell you, Mr. Blades, that I'm a worthy old soul—a sort of father to a good many persons who couldn't do very well without me ——"

"Hold your precious humbugging tongue, you old fool," growled the Hangman, savagely. "I dare say our new friend Blades knows all about you; or else he wouldn't have come hunting you out in Bencull's crib."

"No—but he doesn't know all about me, though," shrieked the old man in a shrill voice: "and what I want is that he should know more about me than he does. Now, my dear kind Daniel, do tell Mr. Blades the truth: tell him that I never have anything to do with burglaries, highway robberies, or pocket-pickings; but that I am a moral man—a church-going man—a man who subscribes to charities and does a thousand little benevolent things in a quiet way."

"Aye—all your benevolence is snug enough, I'll be bound, Jeremy," exclaimed the Hangman: then turning towards the knife-grinder, he said, "You never in all your life saw such a snivelling, sneaking, blarneying, whining, coaxing old fool as this Jeremy Humpage. He's constantly endeavouring to persuade himself and others that he's not a regular fence who buys stolen goods, but a philanthropist who gives poor devils a good price for the scrapings of the gutters, the searchings of the sewers, and the rakings of the dunghills. If you even took him a chest of plate that cost a thousand guineas, he wouldn't seem to suspect for an instant that it was stolen: he'd ask you what nobleman or gentleman was in difficulties and had sent you to dispose of the property. Why, even I'm an honest man in old Jeremy's calculation," added Coffin, with a grim smile.

"To be sure, to be sure," said Humpage—for such was Jeremy's surname: "I never have anything to do with rogues and rascals. I don't want to fall out with the authorities and have the constables set in chase of me: I don't choose to know a single thing that's going on, unless it's all right and straightfor-

ward. I never look behind the scenes, Mr. Blades—never, never. The men and the women down stairs are all poor creatures who pick up little things in the gutters and on the dunghills, and bring them to me to buy!"

"Yes—such pretty things as watches, snuff-boxes, rings, and gold chains," observed the Hangman, with a sarcastic leer. "They're plentiful enough in London: it isn't however in the gutters, on the dunghills, and in the sewers they're found—but in the pockets, round the necks, and on the fingers of gentlemen and ladies."

"Well, well—it may be," said old Jeremy, in a querulous voice and with nervous manner. "But recollect this, my dear friend Mr. Blades—for good friends we shall no doubt become—recollect, I say, that I am no associate of bad characters—I have nothing to do with them. I am a man of reputation—buying and selling in a legitimate manner; and if I come down occasionally to my kind friend, Mr. Bencull's house——"

"Once a week at least, old fellow," ejaculated the Hangman.

"You see how jocular he is, Mr. Blades," said Humpage; "so full of life and spirits! Well, I look upon him as a son——"

"You crafty, hypocritical, lying old vagabond," interrupted Daniel Coffin,—"you know you hate me as the devil does holy water. But you're obliged to keep friends with me—and so am I with you, unfortunately. I wish, however, you would leave off this canting, droning, wheedling style of your's, and speak out like a man. But that you'll never do. You and I have known each other a many years now—and you've always been the same."

"So have you, my dear Daniel," returned Humpage, with an air of bland ingenuousness;—"always the same jovial, waggish, good-natured fellow."

"Good-natured indeed!" growled the Hangman, looking about as well pleased as an angry bull-dog. "Precious good-natured, no doubt, not to have knocked you on the head long ago."

"That would never do, my dear kind friend," said Humpage, with another cackling laugh, as if he thought the Hangman was only joking. "If anything happened to me, Daniel, what would you do when you found a handsome gold watch in the street, or a splendid snuff-box lying in some deserted corner? No one would use you so well as I do. And when, too, some nobleman or gentleman trusted you with a plate-chest to dispose of—or a lady gave you her diamonds to sell for her——"

"Hark at the old fool!" ejaculated Jack Ketch, in deep disgust. "He knows as well as possible that he never bought a watch or a snuff-box of me in all his life that wasn't stolen—and that he never melted down a single piece of plate that wasn't the produce of a burglary."

"Was there ever a man so fond of a joke as my dear friend Dan Coffin?" cried old Jeremy, chuckling again. "But I was going to tell you, Mr. Blades, when he interrupted me just now," continued the fence, addressing himself to the knife-grinder,—"that if I come occasionally to my old friend Bencull's very respectable and well-conducted lodging-house, it is only to save such poor creatures as those down stairs the trouble of coming to me at my own abode in Whitechapel. I look upon them all as my own children, and love them as dearly——"

"Curse this nonsense!" ejaculated the Hangman, stamping his foot upon the floor with impatience. "You're enough to drive one mad with your hypocritical, carneying trash."

"Don't be angry, my excellent friend—don't be angry," said Humpage. "I only wanted our new friend Mr. Blades, to know what sort of a person I am——"

"Well—and now he'll take your word for it," interrupted Jack Ketch. "Come—we've had enough of blarney and gammon; and therefore let's see if we can't talk rationally for a few minutes. In the first place, am I one too many here? Because, if so, I'll step down stairs again——"

"Not a bit of it—not a bit of it," cried old Jeremy Humpage.

"Well, then—I'll stop," continued the Hangman. "And now tell me, you ancient hypocrite, what you wanted to see me for, and why you was mentioning my name in such friendly terms just at the very moment that I came up?"

"The fact is," returned Jeremy, now lowering his voice to a whisper, "our new friend here, Mr. Tibby Blades—and a very pretty name it is, too—happened to hear my name mentioned at Miss Scratchem's highly respectable lodging-house in Whitechapel——"

"Polly Scratchem's flash crib—eh?" exclaimed the Hangman. "Well—go on. I suppose our friend Blades," he added, glancing towards the knife-grinder, "heard that you was a precious old fence——"

"A fair-dealing purchaser of miscellaneous goods, you mean," said Jeremy. "And so, as our new friend Blades expects to have a few things to dispose of in the course of next week, and as he wants to leave town the first thing to-morrow morning, he thought he had better see me without delay. Is it not so, my dear Mr. Blades?"

"That's right enough," answered the knife-grinder. "And when I'd explained myself to you, you said that if I wanted any assistance in *moving* the few things I spoke of, you could recommend me to Mr. Daniel Coffin as a individual you'd knowed and esteemed for many years."

"Now I understand," exclaimed the Hangman, then, taking Tibby Blades by the button-hole and looking him significantly in the face, he said, "Is there really anything to be done anywhere?—and do you want a pal in the matter?"

"Don't discuss your schemes in my presence!" cried old Jeremy. "I've introduced you to each other—and that's enough. Go and talk elsewhere, like dear good creatures as you are."

"Well, well—you needn't mind us—we shan't be many minutes," observed the Hangman. "And I want to say something to you presently, old Jeremy—something that will make your precious toothless mouth water, I know."

"Always joking—always joking!" chuckled Humpage: but as the Hangman drew the knife-grinder aside into a corner, a scowl of diabolical malignity passed over the countenance of the ancient fence.

"Now, my fine fellow," whispered the Hangman to Tibby Blades, "I'm a person of few words—and I hate such wretched drivelling and loathsome nonsense as that old impostor has been indulging

in. Of course you see through him as well as I do. But enough of that. I told you just now that I like your looks: what I ought to have said was that I like what I've heard of you—because as for your looks, you'll excuse me for saying that they're scarcely distinguishable through the grime and soot."

"And what have you heard of me?" inquired Tibby Blades.

"That you're one of the right sort," was the immediate answer. "So, in a few words, if you've anything in hand where you want the aid of a staunch comrade, I'm your man."

"The truth is," said the knife-grinder, "I know of a job that can be done nice and safe—down in the country somewhere——"

"Is it a crack?" demanded the Hangman, thus figuratively inquiring whether the affair alluded to was an intended burglary.

"No—a post-chaise robbery," rejoined the knife-grinder. "The genelman to be robbed is now in town: his butler and me are on a tolerable good understanding together—and that's how I've got my information. Last evening, as I was leaving Richmond, I met this here butler who was a-pleasuring down there for the day; and he told me as how his master will leave London one day next week in a post-chaise, and with a trunk full of new plate and all kinds of jewellery and trinkets for his family."

"Ah! by the gibbet and halter! this will be good pickings," said the Hangman. "So I suppose that on receiving this information from your friend the butler, you returned to London——"

"Yes—although I'm wanted by the runners," answered the knife-grinder. "Having heard old Jeremy Humpage's name mentioned at Polly Scratchem's, I thought of making it all right with him beforehand, to receive the property and toss it into his melting-pot the instant I get it up to London——"

"*Moving* the goods, as he calls it," observed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "Well—go on."

"I've nothing more to say—only that Polly Scratchem told me where Humpage lived in Whitechapel, and on going to his house I found he wasn't at home; so I went back to Polly, and then she recollected where it was his night to be—and knowing she could trust me, although I'm somewhat of a stranger to the flash coves in London, she whispered that I should find him at the Folly Bridges."*

"Well—and he has agreed to receive the property, supposing the affair comes off?" said the Hangman, inquiringly.

"In his humbugging fashion," answered the knife-grinder, "he has told me that if so be any nobleman or genelman sends me to his house with certain goods to dispose of, he won't make no bones of buying 'em off-hand. So that point 's as good as settled. To-morrow I'm off into the country—'cos why, London is rayther too hot to hold me: but on Monday I shall come up again to meet my friend the butler—and then he'll let me know the exact day and hour when his master intends to start for home."

"You'll want some one to help you, Tibby," observed the Hangman.

"To be sure—and you shall go snacks with me in the business," was the immediate answer. "I'll see you again next Monday, either here or wherever you like."

"At my place in Fleet Lane," said Jack Ketch. "Of course old Jeremy has told you who I am—Dan'el Coffin—public executioner—cheap barber—and all that sort of thing."

"I twig, my fine feller," returned Tibby Blades.

"Then we've nothing more to say at present," observed the Hangman. "You can step down stairs and blow a cloud, while I just transact a little private business with old Jeremy Humpage—and then I'll join you. I suppose you ain't in a hurry to be off for an hour or so?"

"Not a bit of it," responded the knife-grinder. "On the contrary, I should like to have a little chat with you, so as to make us better acquainted—partickler as we're going to do business together."

"Well, I'll join you and the others down below in a few minutes," said the Hangman.

Tibby Blades accordingly returned to the lower room, while Daniel Coffin remained behind to discourse with old Jeremy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COMPANY AT THE DARK CRIB.

THE knife-grinder, on resuming his seat at the table amongst the rogues and vile women assembled there, lighted his pipe—ordered more brandy—and proceeded to indulge in a more scrutinizing survey of the company than he had previously been enabled to take.

There was one hideous-looking man, with his nose smashed flat to his face, so that he resembled a being with a death's head. He had a black eye and a handkerchief tied over his forehead—which did not improve his appearance. He was a Swag Chovey Bloak, or marine-store dealer,—a fence on a small scale, and was accustomed to sell to old Jeremy any articles of value which he purchased from the thieves or pickpockets in immediate connexion with himself.

There were two fellows, each with a black patch over one eye, although the optics thus concealed were perfect and free from injury as those which were left uncovered. But one pretended to be an old soldier, declaring that he had lost an eye in the wars: and he was called Bob the Durrynacker, *alias* the Beggar. The other was a Mushroom Faker, or fellow who went about with umbrellas to mend: and the black patch was now a part of some new disguise which he had recently assumed.

There was a very pale-faced man, dressed in seedy black, and having an appearance of shabby respectability. He looked like a decayed tradesman—one who had seen better days; and by dint of practice, he had subdued and plasticised his countenance into an expression of profoundly sanctimonious melancholy. He was a regular Highflyer of Fakements, or Begging-letter Impostor: and he kept his cheeks pale, thin, and emaciated by drinking a bottle of Mr. Bencull's vitriolised gin every night of his life.

* In the days of which we are writing—namely, thirty-six years ago—Jacob's Island was generally known as "The Folly Bridges."

Another of the delectable company present was a jovial good-humoured looking man, with the crown of his white hat hanging half off. He was a Buttoner, or thimble-rig professional, and was remarkably ready with all that coarse wit and slang humour which fellows of his class deal in so glibly for the purpose of attracting dupes at fairs and races, and keeping them amused when they are once so attracted.

The women were young—coarse in appearance, and disgusting alike in conduct and speech. Their persons were very much exposed, and they encouraged the freedoms which their male companions took with them. They belonged to the lowest class of unfortunate women who infest the vilest neighbourhoods of the metropolis.

As a matter of course, all these persons were thieves, with the exception of the marine-store dealer, who was only the recipient of stolen goods and a sort of agent for old Jeremy Humpage. The "old soldier" was one of the sturdiest and most obtrusive beggars in the metropolis; and while following a gentleman or lady with his importunities, he was remarkably dexterous in easing the former of a snuff-box or handkerchief, and the latter of a reticule —or either of them of a purse. The umbrella-mender was wont to knock at front-doors and induce the servants to go and inquire "if anything was wanting to be done in his little way"—and while left alone for a moment, he would walk off with a hat, cloak, or umbrella from the hall. Or else he would go down area-steps, or round to back doors, and frequently find opportunities of decamping with the plate that might be left about on kitchen-tables or dressers. The same system was practised by the begging-letter impostor, who was even enabled at times to introduce himself into the parlours of charitable people and secrete a watch, a mantel-ornament, or other article of value about his person.

The thimble-rigger was accustomed to "work with mobs," or accomplices, who hustled and robbed the unfortunate dupes attracted to the itinerant gambling table; and it generally fell to his lot to dispose of the "frisked swag," or booty. Hence his presence at the dark crib on the nights when old Jeremy was wont to visit it.

The women not only pursued their loathsome trade in the usual manner, but also enticed drunken and unwary persons to the dark crib or other infamous houses at Folly's Bridges; and there the victims were plundered of all they had about them worth taking. Sometimes they were cruelly maltreated:—and from time to time that dreadful neighbourhood became the scene of deeds of still blacker dye and more appalling magnitude.

The knife-grinder was seated on a three-legged stool; and with his soot-begrimed countenance, his ragged hair, his dirty garments, and the short pipe in his mouth, he looked a character perfectly fitted to be in such a place and in such company. Mr. Bencull's bull-dog—a savage brute, answering to the name of Throtler—sate under the table;—and every time a foot accidentally kicked against him, or trod on his tail, he sent forth a ferocious growl that rumbled through the crazy building.

But let us now listen to some of the discourse which took place in that room where the guests were assembled.

"I say, Bob," exclaimed the begging-letter impostor, addressing himself to the Durrynacker, "what's become of Teddy Limber again?"

"Teddy Limber was like to get into trouble t'other day, and so he's speeled from his old crib," was the reply. "I'll tell you how it was. He'd tied up prigging and taken to faking the sinkers. Larry Sampson found him out, and went to his crib up in the Holy Land. Larry enters the place with a couple of runners, and insists on making a search. But for a long time it was no go; and Teddy Limber stood by laughing. At length Larry moves the bedstead and examines the floor. Then Teddy's face begins to darken; and Larry sees he's on the right scent. So he pokes about; and in the corner, just under where one of the legs of the bedstead had stood, he takes up a bit of the flooring, about a couple of inches square—just big enough to put the hand in. Then he feels a string, and he draws up a worsted stocking containing a lot of gammy cases, half-cases, cooters, pegs, and snids. So when Teddy sees that he's twigged, he rushes to the door—gives a right-hander to one of Larry's men, and a left-hander to t'other—knocks 'em both down—rushes out—and bolts the door on 'em. Larry was betwixt the bedstead and the wall at the time, and couldn't get out quick enough to help his chaps or seize hold of Teddy. So Teddy gets clear off as cocum as you please."*

"And what's become of Teddy now?" inquired one of the women, who laughed more heartily than their male companions at this anecdote.

"Not knowing, can't say," was the Durrynacker's response. "But I was going to tell you how Larry Sampson went on to find that Teddy had a false mantel-piece in his crib; and when the mantel was taken away, a lot of Teddy's traps was discovered in a great recess in the wall—such as the dies, the metal, the melting-pots, and other things used in faking the sinkers. And in the stocking that contained the sinkers, was a bit of paper with Teddy's own written instructions how to make the bright coin look dull and silvery-like: so it's quite clear that Teddy had an order for the sinkers and was going to deliver them just about the time Larry Sampson pounced down upon him."

"And what did the receipt say?" asked the woman who had before spoken.

"Why, the process seems quite a new 'un: but I saw it tried yesterday by Watty Sparkes, and it answers capital. You must put the coin on a hot iron; and when the colour begins to change, clap it in a bag of bran and shake it well: then pass it through a bit of cheese, and wipe it clean with a coarse towel. But it musn't be rubbed much."

"Well, that's simple enow," observed the knife-grinder, refilling his pipe. "And so Watty Sparkes is in that line, eh? I thought he was out in the country crocusing along with Patty Finks who does the dookin."†

"So he was," answered the Durrynacker: "but he's come back, along with Patty—and now they're in business as sinker-fakers somewhere over in Shadwell. But I say, old Swag Chovey Bloak,"

* Speeled—cut and run. Tied up prigging—given up thieving. Faking the sinkers—making base money. Holy Land—St. Giles's. Gammy—spurious. Cases—crowns. Half-cases—half-crowns. Cooters—sovereigns. Pegs—shillings. Snids—sixpences. Cocum—clever.

† Crocusing—travelling about the country selling soap and quack-medicines. Dooking—fortune-telling.

exclaimed Bob the Beggar, turning towards the marine-store dealer, "how the devil come you with that black eye and with your head tied up in that fashion?"

"Why, in consequence of that very Teddy Limber you've been talking about," was the gruff and sulky answer: "so you see I can give another chapter in his history if I like."

"Well, and won't you like?" asked one of the women, coaxingly.

"Oh! if it's to please you, I will," returned the marine-store dealer, somewhat mollified by this bland appeal. "You must know, then, that when Teddy escaped from his crib up in the Holy Land, as the Durrynacker has told you, he come right away to my house in St. George's Fields. I took him in, and put him up safe in the front room first floor, amongst all the rags, bones, bottles, and old iron. Well, it seems that Larry Sampson traced him out, and came with his people to take him. It was late at night—and they knocked at the street-door. I was sitting smoking a pipe and drinking a drop of blue ruin with Teddy, when we heard the knock. We suspected what it was;—and so I opened the window and asked who was there and what they wanted. Larry said he must come in. I told him no one he could possibly want was there; but he said that was no business of mine. '*Keep him talking a minute,*' says Teddy, in a whisper to me; '*and I'll get out on the leads.*' For of course Teddy knew that Sampson had posted some of his men at the back of the house; or else he would not have been such a fool as to come and raise an alarm at the front door. But all in a moment Larry Sampson begins to push away at the front door to force it open; and while I was leaning out of the window blackguarding him for breaking into an Englishman's house, which is his castle, lo and behold, I lost my balance and pitched out into the street."

At this stage of the narrative, the Buttoner, or thimble-rig professional, gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise, accompanied by an oath: but when the looks of all present were turned upon him as if seeking an explanation, he hastily bade the marine-store dealer proceed, observing that he would explain afterwards.

"Well," continued the Swag Chovey Bloak, "I must do Larry Sampson the justice to say, much as I hate him as a cursed thief-taker, that he and his men instantly left off pushing at the door and hastened to pick me up; and this gave Teddy Limber time to get safe away over the roofs of the houses. The fall deuced near killed me: but it hasn't quite, however," added the man with a ghastly smile.

"So your misfortune was Teddy's salvation," observed the knife-grinder, who appeared to enjoy the anecdote amazingly.

"Well, this is the rummest lark I ever knew in all my life," exclaimed the Buttoner: "and that's what made me sing out as I did just now, because I've heard the story before about the pitching out of the winder. But is Teddy Limber a tall, thin, shambling feller, with precious long arms and legs?"

"Just so," returned the Durrynacker. "He reminds one of a giblet pie—all wings and legs."

"Then by jingo it *is* the same!" cried the Buttoner. "The rascal—I'll pay him out!"

"What has he done?" asked several voices.

"He stunned me of my regulars," replied the indignant thimble-rigger: "and I'll tell you how it was. I was down at Chatham on Saturday, and there was a fair there. Well, I was working the tiddlywink with a mob, when a feller comes up and gets into conversation. I saw he was a leary chap, and thought he'd suit as a pal. So we went to a public-house, had some drink, and talked matters over. He told me how he'd bolted from London; and how a friend of his'n had pitched out of the winder while blarneying with the runners. So I was took with him; and he agreed to work with my mob. We went back into the fair and set up the table. '*Now,*' says I, as the yokels and flats gathered round, '*here's von, two, and three; the fairest game that ever you see. The royal game of tiddlywink, paytronised by their Majesties, his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chief Justice, and all the nobility and gentry. Here you are: now's your time and now's your opportunity. Them as doesn't bet can't win; and them as does bet is sure to lose. Von, two, three—the fashionable game of tiddlywink, now in vogue at all the first houses in the land!*'—Well, I was a-going on at this rate, when a regular yokel chucks down a guinea, swearing he'd tell under which thimble the little pea was. '*Von, two, three,*' says I; '*them as uses their eyes, must see. Four, five, six: here's the little pea capering about like bricks. Seven, eight, nine: the game shall be mine. Now, sir, you can't tell under which thimble is the little pea.*'—'*This von,*' says the yokel, pinting to a thimble.—'*No it isn't,*' says I: '*the little pea, here he be.*' And I lifted up another thimble. Then bang went the flat's hat over his eyes—my mobs-men hustled him—and away I scampered with the tiddlywink-table, while Teddy Limber (although I didn't know his name then) frisked the yokel of his yack and skin. All was confusion in the crowd: but we every one of the party managed to get safe off. Well, me and my pals met presently at the public-house where we'd agreed to meet: but Teddy Limber never come near the place at all. We waited for him a long time; and then one of us went out to see if he'd been lumbered. But no such thing. He had cut and run—and we never heard or saw any more of him."*

"Shameful!" ejaculated several voices.

"To bounce you out of your regulars!" cried the women, even more indignant than the men.

At this moment the trap-door opened—and Daniel Coffin the Hangman descended the ladder from the room above. Almost at the same time Mr. Bencull, who had been engaged in another part of his little establishment, rejoined the company: but it was evident from his appearance that he had been indulging in copious libations. His hat was cocked over his right ear—and he carried a bottle in his hand: but, seating himself next to the Swag Chovey Bloak, he assumed that air of drunken mysteriousness and wisdom which people in their cups so often put on in order to seem sober.

"We'll drink the health of our new friend what's-

* Stunned me of my regulars—cheated me of my share of the booty. Working the tiddlywink—doing the thimble-rig. With a mob—with several confederates. Leary—sharp, wide-awake. Yokels—countrymen. Frisked—robbed. Yack and skin—watch and purse. Lumbered—taken into custody.

his-name," hiccoughed forth Mr. Bencull, as he grasped the bottle in one hand and a little pewter measure in the other.

"With all my heart," said the Hangman, filling a glass and holding it up. "May he never want a fooney to flash in a boozing-ken; nor ever pad the hoof or flare in tats for want of the long-tailed finnips to buy nibsome toggery."*

This toast was drunk with uproarious applause, in the excitement of which Mr. Bencull tumbled from his seat and rolled on the floor. This incident added to the prevailing mirth; and when it had somewhat subsided and the landlord had picked himself up again, Tibby Blades acknowledged the honour which had been done him in a "neat speech" that showed his erudition with regard to the flash language.

The Hangman now stated that Jeremy Humpage was ready up-stairs to receive those who had any bargains in hand with him; and all present save Daniel Coffin himself, the knife-grinder, and Bencull, ascended the ladder to receive the amounts which the old fence was inclined to offer for the various articles submitted to his appraisement. A great deal of haggling, abuse, recrimination, and quarrelling ensued: but the miserable wretches, who were all at the mercy of the ancient villain, were ultimately compelled to accept his terms;—and having received about one-tenth part of the value of the stolen goods, they retraced their steps down the ladder into the lower room.

Old Jeremy and the Swag Chovey Bloak soon afterwards quitted the house together; and those who remained behind called for more liquor, vowing that they would enjoy themselves.

Presently a knock was heard at the street-door of the house: and Bencull staggered along the passage with a light in his hand to answer the summons. Some whispering took place—a female voice was heard in conversation with Bencull—and then the street-door was closed and the door of the front room opened, evidently to admit new-comers.

"Who the deuce can they be?" said the Hangman.

But scarcely had he made this remark, when Bencull returned to the room, looking more mysteriously knowing in his inebriation than ever.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE YOUNG LADY.

"WELL, what is it?" demanded Jack Ketch and the women, all as it were in one breath.

"Such a pretty gal—such a sweet little creatur'!" said Bencull, in a low tone and with sapient look. "Quite a innocent, too!"

"Who the devil are you talking about?" asked the Hangman, impatiently—for his curiosity was excited.

"Why, Nell Gibson has picked up a young lady who's lost her way and seems in great distress," returned Bencull; —"not distress in money-matters, I don't mean—'cos why, she's well dressed and has got a well filled purse in her pocket. But she's in what's called distress of mind. I think she must have run away from her parents, or somethink of the sort. At all events, Nell Gibson has got her in tow, and has evidently crammed her well with all kinds of gammon. But if one of you gals will go into the other room and pretend to be Nell's sister, you can stay there a little while with the young lady, and let Nell come to us for a few minutes just to tell us all about it."

"I'll go," exclaimed one of the women, starting from her seat: then, snatching up a rag of a shawl from a corner and throwing it over her shoulders, she covered her hitherto much-exposed bosom, saying, "I musn't frighten the young lady any how. On the contrary, I'll look as modest and demure as if I was at a christening. But what am I to tell her?"

"Why, that this is a respectable house, though a humble one—and that it's kept by honest though poor people," answered Bencull, his speech being interrupted by sundry drunken hiccoughs. "You must pass off as Nell's sister, and make believe that you live here with your parents. Do anythink so as you don't frighten the gal: and mind if she does get alarmed, that she don't slip out of the house. The front door is chained and bolted, but not locked."

"I'll play my part well, you may rest assured," said the young woman: and assuming as quiet a demeanour as she could possibly put on, she quitted the room.

In a few minutes Nell Gibson made her appearance. She was a fine, tall, well-grown girl, about nineteen years of age; and though steeped to the lips in profligacy, she nevertheless had sufficient outward appearance of respectability to deceive an unwary person, especially an inexperienced young creature of her own sex, relative to her true character. She was neatly dressed—and there was little of that brazen-faced impudence and loathsome wantonness in her looks which characterised the other females whom we have already described at the dark crib. Indeed, she was altogether one of the most artful, designing, and dangerous women of her class; and, as if no phase in the infamy of her pursuits should be wanting, she not only enticed unsuspecting men to the abominable houses which she frequented, but also young and artless girls whom she delighted to train in the paths which lead to destruction.

Such was the female who now received a hearty welcome from the Hangman and the other persons present with whom she was acquainted. Indeed, she knew them all full well, with the exception of Tibby Blades the knife-grinder—although he assured her that she was no stranger to him, at least personally, inasmuch as he had seen her before at some flash house.

Her tale relative to the adventure which now engrossed all interest, was soon told. It appeared that as she was returning to her own dwelling, through the maze of vile streets which exist in all the neighbourhood of Jacob's Island, or Folly Bridges, she saw a young lady, by the light of a lamp, seated on a door-step, apparently overcome with exhaustion and grief. By her appearance Nell Gibson judged her to be really what she seemed; and accosting her in a soothing manner, she drew her into conversation. The young lady declared that she had been walking for some time

* May he never want a guinea to sport in a public-house; nor ever go without shoes or appear in rags for want of large Bank-notes to buy good clothes.

—that she had lost her way—but that if any one would conduct her to a respectable lodging for the rest of the night, she was in a condition to pay liberally for the kindness shown and the accommodation furnished. As a proof of this portion of her statement, and being inspired with confidence in Nell Gibson, the young lady exhibited her purse, which was evidently well filled. The artlessness of the tale and the sight of the purse were sufficient to induce the profligate woman to take the young lady under her immediate "protection:" and as Bencull's dark crib was the nearest of the kind, she at once conducted her intended victim thither. Overcome by fatigue of body and distress of mind, the young lady was too glad to welcome any place in the shape of a lodging and anything in the guise of sympathy, to pay very particular attention either to the locality to which she was conducted, or to the person who was conducting her thither: she therefore readily believed that her new friend was really a respectable young woman though in humble circumstances, and that the house was an honest one although in a poor neighbourhood.

The front room, into which the young lady had been shown, was a bed-chamber, although upon the ground-floor; and it was fitted up in a manner infinitely superior to the other parts of the house. It was indeed the room to which persons were assigned when enticed to the crib by any of the loose females connected with the gang: and therefore, for obvious reasons, it was tolerably well furnished. Thus every circumstance combined to lull the young lady into a false security and alleviate any suspicions that the aspect of the neighbourhood might otherwise chance to arouse in her mind. We should however observe that the moon had disappeared some time before she encountered Nell Gibson; and consequently, as she threaded Mill Street in her way to the dark crib, the full horror of Jacob's Island was veiled from her view.

Having told her tale to Bencull and his guests in the little back room, Nell Gibson returned to the chamber occupied by the young lady. The other female whom the landlord sent thither, had played her part sufficiently well, so that the young lady still believed she was in respectable quarters. This female now retired upon the re-appearance of Nell, who inquired if her guest would take any refreshment. But the young lady was so exhausted that she only thought of lying down to rest; and she was even too much fatigued to put off her apparel. She would do no more than lay aside her bonnet and shawl—not because she entertained any misgivings, but in reality because she was drooping and sinking with utter prostration. It did not however escape Nell's notice that the confiding young creature was possessed of a handsome watch and chain, and several other articles of jewellery, in addition to her purse; and she already chuckled inwardly at the rich prize that had fallen into her hands.

In a few moments the young lady threw herself upon the bed; and Nell Gibson, wishing her a sound repose, quitted the chamber—leaving however the candle behind her, for fear of exciting any premature suspicion.

On returning to the back room, she communicated to the persons there assembled the pleasing fact of the valuable jewellery possessed by the young lady; and a council of war was now held, in a subdued tone, relative to the most fitting course that was to be adopted towards the guest.

"Let Nell speak first," said the Hangman, "and give her opinion—as she has had the trouble and shown the tact in getting the girl here."

"I scarce know what to advise," observed the young woman, after a few minutes' consideration "I think, now that I 've seen more of her, that she's too innocent to break in all on a sudden: and if we attempt to keep her here by force, she'll alarm the whole neighbourhood with her cries and screams. At the same time, I'm resolved that we will have the purse and the jewels, happen what will. It would be downright madness to let them slip through our fingers. I can say no more."

"But you have your secret thoughts, though, Nell," observed the woman who had been into the young lady's chamber: "and I can read 'em," she added with dark and ominous significancy.

"And so can I," observed the Buttoner. "I know what I'd do in such a case."

"What?" demanded the Hangman, looking at him with the fixity of a diabolical expression of countenance.

"Why—*this*," responded the thimble-rigger, drawing his hand across his throat. "Or else *thus*," he added, making a gesture with his arm as if he were knocking a person on the head with a bludgeon.

The knife-grinder started—nay, almost bounded—on his chair; and all eyes were instantaneously turned inquiringly, and even suspiciously, upon him.

"That's precisely what I'd do also," he observed in a deliberate manner and meeting the looks of his companions with a steady gaze: and at the same time he settled himself in his chair, so that the suddenness of his start seemed only to have been one of those abrupt movements which often accompany a change from one posture to another.

"What would you do, d'ye say?" demanded the Hangman, as if determined to make him express in words the thoughts so darkly hinted at.

"Why, sooner than lose the swag I should be for making away with her, to be sure," answered Tibby, in a resolute voice: "and what's more, if you're afraid to do it——"

"You will?" said the Hangman, in a hasty tone of inquiry.

"Yes—I will," returned the knife-grinder.

"Then tip us your hand, old fellow," said Coffin. "I did you a moment's injustice—I thought you started strangely——"

"Oh! not I," observed Tibby Blades, carelessly: "unless it was that I felt rayther disgusted to think you should all go beating about the bush to get at an idea which all along was uppermost in everybody's thoughts."

"It was in mine," said Nell Gibson, resolutely.

"You knew it was the only plan—didn't you?" demanded the Buttoner.

"To be sure I did," was the girl's answer. "The young lady is innocent and unsuspecting—and I couldn't break her in under a week, perhaps a month. In the mean time, who is to keep watch upon her, night and day, to see she doesn't escape?—and wouldn't her screams and cries soon get talked about all over the neighbourhood? On the other hand, if we rob her and let her go quietly away in the morning, she will of course lodge an

information against us and we shall all be laid up in lavender and lagged."*

"All that's the very same notion that I've got in the matter," said the Mushroom Faker.

"There's no disputing the argument," observed Bob the Durrynacker.

"But if we are all in for the risk as accomplices," said the Highflyer of Fakements, "we must also go shares on equal terms."

"To be sure—ekal sheers?" cried the Buttoner.

"Hush!" whispered Nell Gibson, in a tone of authority. "There's two persons that must have more than the rest: one's myself, for bringing the young lady here—and the other's the individual, whoever he may be, that will do the job."

"All fair and right enough," observed the Hangman.

"So I say!" exclaimed Bencull: then, rising from his seat and staggering towards the door, he said with a hiccough, "I'll do the job, blow me!"

"No, no," cried the Hangman, clutching him by the arm and dragging him back to his seat; "you're not in a fit state—you'll only make a mess of it."

"I'm your man!" said Tibby Blades, the knife-grinder, starting up. "Lend us your club, Dan'el—and in a very few minutes the young lady shall wake in another place. Only keep that cussed dog quiet—'cos animals of that sort is apt to howl and moan when there's death in a house."

"We'll take care of him," observed the Hangman, as he gave his short knotted stick to the knife-grinder. "Here—toss off another dram of bingo—and then get to work. There's no use delaying in these kinds of things."

"Not a bit of use," said the women, assentingly: but, with the exception of Nell Gibson whose heart

* Laid up in lavender and lagged—thrown into prison and transported.

was steeled against all pity and all remorse, they spoke in hushed voices and with a cold shuddering.

"Now I'm ready," observed the knife-grinder, having drained the glass which Jack Ketch presented to him: and, grasping the club, he fixed his hat with an air of resolution upon his head, and was preparing to leave the room when a sudden thought struck him. "You must lend me the light," he said, taking up the only one that was left burning on the table.

"No—don't leave us in the dark," cried one of the women, a ghastly pallor instantaneously superseding the flush of drinking.

"Coward—fool!" hissed from the lips of Nell Gibson, as her eyes glared like those of a tiger-cat upon the young woman: then turning towards the knife-grinder, she said, "There's no necessity to take this candle, because I left one burning in the lady's room."

"Very good," observed Tibby Blades. "Now don't move or make a noise till I come back. I shan't be many minutes absent," he added with a look of ominous significancy.

He then quitted the room, closing the door behind him.

Gently he crept along the short passage: but though he walked as if treading upon ice too thin to bear him, the crazy boards creaked beneath his feet. He groped for the latch of the door opening into the front chamber: he found it—raised it cautiously—and entered the room. The candle was still burning upon a little round table in the middle—and the young lady was lying stretched in profound slumber upon the bed.

But the knife-grinder did not waste a moment in contemplating her. He closed the door—and put a chair slanting-wise against it so as to secure it from being opened unless by great force: for there was no lock or fastening of any kind save the mere latch. He then cautiously raised the window and examined the shutter. A single bolt held it; and it opened like a door on the outside of the casement.

Leaving the shutter still closed, but the window open, Tibby Blades approached the bed and shook the young lady by the shoulder. She opened her eyes; and starting up, was about to give vent to a scream. But the knife-grinder instantaneously said, "For God's sake, be still!" in so hurried yet deep and impressive a manner, that the sound died upon her lips—and her terror showed itself in a wild gaze.

"Young lady, I am your friend—don't mind my appearance—for I'm only a poor tinker," were the hasty words which he now whispered in her ears. "You are in a dreadful place—and you must get up and escape without a moment's delay."

The young lady sate up on the bed and still gazed wildly upon the knife-grinder, as if a terrible consternation were upon her.

"Here—take your jewels—put on your things—and be off—for God's sake be off!" said the man, in so earnest and imploring a tone that the young creature was instantaneously awakened as it were to a sense of some frightful peril and to the necessity of energetic action.

Trembling, however, from head to foot, and with chattering teeth, she huddled on her clothes and thrust her purse and jewels into her pocket. The knife-grinder opened the shutter as gently as he could, and helped her out into the street. But at that instant the rush of footsteps in the passage fell on his ears—and at the moment he was preparing to follow her through the window, the chamber-door was broken in. He sprang after her into the street: but he stumbled—fell heavily with his head against a stone—and was stunned. In another instant the Hangman, who bounded after him through the window, was kneeling upon him, keeping him down—while Nell Gibson and some others of the gang opened the front-door and rushed in pursuit of the young lady.

Away she sped along the street, terror giving wings to her feet, but paralysing her tongue. She heard the pursuers—and yet she could not cry out for assistance. Fortunately for her, a number of men belonging to one of the wharves on Bermondsey Walk were just going to their work at an hour unusually early, on account of some lighter that was to be loaded for the next tide;—and the young lady, perceiving by the glimmering of dawn which was now breaking, that they were honest-looking fellows, at once appealed to them for protection.

Nell Gibson and her accomplices, observing the turn which the adventure had thus taken, hurried back to the dark crib, into which the Hangman and Bencull had in the meantime borne the still senseless knife-grinder. The shutter was speedily closed again—the street-door secured—and thus, in a few minutes, the dreadful house once more presented a tranquil though gloomy and sombre exterior to the view.

In a hurried and incoherent manner, the young lady told the wharfingers how she had been enticed to some bad place close by—how she had been warned of danger and assisted to escape by some friendly-disposed person—and how this person in endeavouring to follow her, had fallen and been secured by the inmates of the dwelling. The working-men, compassionating the afflicted young creature, offered to escort her to a safer neighbourhood: but they were too much accustomed to hear of broils and disturbances in Jacob's Island to think it worth their while to mix themselves up any farther in the matter. Two of them accordingly set off to conduct her away from that vicinage—and the others proceeded to their work.

But in the meantime what had happened inside the dark crib?

The knife-grinder, still stunned and senseless from the effects of his fall, had been borne into the dwelling and carried to that back room where the night's orgie had taken place. The villains laid him upon the floor, and in hurried manner deliberated upon the course that they should pursue. That he was either a traitor or a coward they felt convinced; and in either case there was every reason to apprehend that he would betray them. He had heard enough of their proceedings and their plans, even setting aside their intention to murder the young lady, to consign them all to prison and send them out as transports from the country;—and so desperate a set of miscreants were not likely to hesitate long how to dispose of so dangerous an individual. They therefore resolved to make away with him; and as he was already in a state of insensibility, this course could be carried out with but little violence and no noise.

All present being agreed upon the point, the

murderers at once determined to do their dreadful work. A door opened from the passage on to the little wooden gallery at the back of the house; and the inanimate form of the knife-grinder was speedily conveyed thither. A profound silence reigned throughout Jacob's Island—and not a light was visible at any window. The morning was just breaking—but a mist hung over the neighbourhood, and through it was seen the ditch, black and stagnant.

Over the parapet of the wooden gallery did the miscreants push the senseless form of the knife-grinder: they loosened their hold—the victim fell—there was a heavy splash—and, without waiting to see more, the murderers glided back into the dwelling, where they instantaneously extinguished the candle.

At the same moment there was a rush of water in the black ditch—the flood-gates were just opened at the manufactory on the wharf—and the tide of the Thames came pouring in with unusual rapidity and volume. The purer waters mingling with the muddy contents of the dyke rolled on in turbid eddies; and the miscreants, as they sate silent and motionless in the little back room, heard the gloomy plash against the piles and the overhanging floor under their feet.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BARBER'S SHOP.

Dim and shivering, the twilight of early dawn was dragging itself slowly and irresolutely from the eastern horizon; and the modern Babylon began to awaken from its night of repose. But how gradual was this arousing of the mighty city; and how strangely its process followed the same direction as the creeping course of morn itself! In the docks and wharves of the extreme east of London,—in the low neighbourhoods of Poplar, Limehouse, Stepney, and the Tower Hamlets, on one side of the river—and in the swampy districts of Rotherhithe and Bermondsey on the other,—did the sons and daughters of toil first begin to leave their humble beds and enter on the avocations of the day. Then, as the glimmerings of dawn passed sluggishly on in their westward course, did the process of wakening and rising continue in the same direction,—so that, on the northern side of the Thames, did Whitechapel, the City, Finsbury and Westminster gradually arouse themselves to the bustle of the new-born day—while the same signs of reviving animation began successively to develop themselves throughout the huge districts of Southwark and Lambeth. Thus last of all did the rich ones of the West End and of the mansions of Pimlico slowly put off the trammels of sleep and quit their downy beds, to resume their worthless and indolent career of luxuriousness, and pamper their appetites with the produce of the toil of the starving millions.

But long before the infamous idleness of the West End had even awakened from its first sleep, and while the thousand churches of London were proclaiming the hour of seven, the cheap barber's shop in Fleet Lane was opening to its customers. Narrow and dirty is that lane—a beggarly offshoot from the grandly wide and more respectable-looking thoroughfare of Farringdon Street: narrow and dirty, we say, it is even at the present day—but in the times of which we are writing, it was one of the filthiest and vilest places in the whole neighbourhood. The dingy dwellings were crowded from cellar to attic with the poorest families, penury fostering all kinds of demoralisation, and demoralisation expanding into crime. Groups of ragged urchins and half-naked girls were seen playing in the gutters from morning to night, and appeasing the cravings of hunger with the refuse and offal they picked up. At the door-ways slattern women and ferocious-looking fellows, or pale-faced famished creatures and worn-out dispirited artizans, might be observed talking together at all hours of the day; and a peep into the public-houses would show little assemblies of the vilest and most dissolute, brawling or indulging in obscene jests over their drink. The windows of the houses were black with grime; and the broken panes were stopped up with dingy pieces of paper pasted over, or old rags stuffed through the holes.

The cheap barber's shop was situate mid-way up the lane, on the left hand side going from Farringdon Street. This was the establishment of Daniel Coffin, who dwelt in that neighbourhood because it was immediately contiguous to Newgate, at which gaol his functions as public executioner were often exercised in those sanguinary times when the aristocracy ruled predominant, its sway being then as yet undisputed by the middle classes. The aristocracy had therefore every opportunity of manifesting the cruel instincts which are inherent in its very nature; and the result was that it was by no means unusual to see six, eight, or ten criminals hung up at the door of Newgate on a Monday morning. The laws, made by that aristocracy, first drove men to commit crime in their desperation, and then sent these unfortunate victims to the gibbet. Oh! what murders—what atrocious, cold-blooded murders have thus been perpetrated in the name of justice and under cover of the law!

Scarcely a Monday passed without an execution in those times when the madman George III was King, and when the unprincipled voluptuary his eldest son was Prince Regent. Daniel had therefore enough to do on the first day of every week; and it was his fearful occupation as Jack Ketch which had gradually brutalized him to such an extent that he plunged into the ways of deepest, darkest turpitude, as the reader has already seen.

The Hangman had been brought up as a hair-dresser's apprentice; and he kept a barber's shop as a cloak and a blind for the infamy of his secret but far more lucrative pursuits. He was a widower: his wife had died somewhat suddenly about nine years previous to the date of our tale—and it was of course generally whispered that she had met foul play at his hands. Having plenty of money at his command, in consequence of his nefarious practices, he was wont to assist the poor wretches dwelling in his neighbourhood; but this "benevolence" on his part was only a matter of calculation and policy, and not the result of any really good feeling. The pittances which he occasionally thus expended, purchased for him immunity from those insults and jeers, and perhaps rough usage, which would otherwise have been bestowed upon the man

who filled the hateful post and bore the shocking appellation of Jack Ketch. In addition to these little "charities," he shaved for a lower fee than any other barber in the vicinage; and therefore he was patronised by the poor men to whom such cheapness was an object, and by the ruffians who either belonged to his gang or experienced a brutal delight in the conversation of so renowned a personage as the Public Hangman.

Daniel Coffin occupied the whole dwelling to which his shop belonged. His establishment consisted of a woman who lived with him as his mistress and served as his housekeeper, and a couple of young men who acted as his assistants. The elder of these young men and the woman were brother and sister; and their name was Melmoth. The former was twenty-seven years of age —the latter about a couple of years younger. The other assistant was nineteen, and was known only as Jack the Foundling. He never had any other name to his knowledge; and from his infancy he had been brought up with the Melmoths. About seven or eight years previously to the date of our narrative, the Hangman had picked up the three in a place of resort for juvenile thieves, called the Kinchin-Ken, in Grub-street; and, taking a fancy to the girl, he had proposed to her to live with him, his wife having recently died. But Sally Melmoth had refused to separate from her brother Dick, and from the Foundling, whom she loved also like a brother; and the Hangman therefore took the "lot," as he denominated them, into his house. From that day forth they had lived with him; and the young men were so brutalized by the whole tenour of their existence, that they felt no indignation nor regret at seeing Sally, whom they both really loved, the mistress of the Hangman.

Sarah—or Sally, as she was familiarly called—was short and slightly made. Her countenance was pale and even emaciated with the effects of early immorality and continued dissipation. She possessed that cast of countenance which, had she led a proper life, would have rendered her good-looking. Her hair was dark brown and might have proved a rich adornment, had it been duly cared for: her teeth were good—but her lips had the vivid redness that denotes the habitual use of ardent spirits. Her figure was naturally well formed, though slender; and the bust, which was well developed, would have been pronounced positively fine: but the same destructive causes which had marred her in other respects, had injured her appearance in this, and the plumpness of youth was merging rapidly into a premature flaccidity.

Her brother Richard—or Dick, as he was invariably called—was short, thin, and pale like his sister. He had a face which if not precisely villanous, was still indicative of a low cunning and evil artfulness, with which expression were mingled the traces of dissipation.

Jack the Foundling was, as we have already stated, nineteen years of age; and although young and remarkably handsome, yet profligacy had stamped its indelible marks upon his countenance, rendering his features a lamentable index to the utter desecration which had taken place in the sanctuary of his mind. He was tall and well formed, with a frame at once lithe and well-knit—supple and muscular; and there was something intellectual and lofty in the formation of his features. But this effect, which might have been so grandly developed, was entirely counteracted, and approaching fast to complete obliteration, under the influence of those evil passions and pursuits which gave the features their expression.

Having thus glanced at the individuals belonging to the Hangman's household, we will pause to say a few words relative to his shop, and then pursue the thread of our narrative.

Picture to yourself, reader, a small room, with the blackened walls embellished by prints representing the execution of several noted highwaymen—a mantle-piece covered with black-handled razors, lather-brushes, soap-boxes, and scissors—a few packages of soap, some hair-brushes, combs, and tooth-brushes, scattered about in the window, with a rude barber's-block mounting sentry in the midst—a jack-towel hung to a door-communicating with an inner room —a basin and broken jug for the accomodation of customers—and two or three chairs for the use of the said customers,—picture all these details, gentle reader, and you have the Hangman's shop present to your mind's eye.

It was seven o'clock in the morning following the adventures so recently narrated: and the establishment of Mr. Daniel Coffin was opened to the public. Dick Melmoth took down the broken, ricketty shutters—Jack the Foundling hung out the barber's pole—and Sally just dragged a brush over the floor of the shop, as a sort of make-believe for sweeping it. She then retired to the kitchen to prepare the breakfast, while the two young men put on dirty aprons and got in readiness the tin-cans of hot water and the shaving-apparatus.

By the time these preliminaries were arranged, the Hangman made his appearance in the shop. He had not laid aside his clothes all night, nor snatched a moment's repose: indeed it was past six o'clock when he returned home from the Folly Bridges. But he had refreshed himself with what he called "a good wash:" and although he declared he felt "uncommonly seedy," it was all the same in respect to his looks, which were naturally so ghastly and repulsive that no influence of dissipation, emotion, or fatigue could render their aspect much worse.

"Well, got all neat and tidy, I hope," he observed in a tone of subdued growling, as he glanced round the shop: for he was evidently in no very amiable humour. "Nobody been yet, I suppose?"

"It's only just gone seven," answered the Foundling.

"I don't care a fig what it's gone," responded the Hangman, gruffly: "I wanted to know whether anybody was come."

"Nobody, then," replied the lad, pertly.

"None of your impudence, young fellow," exclaimed Coffin; "or I'll give you the strap across your back."

"Then don't talk sulky to me, that's all," said the Foundling. "I'm civil to you: why can't you be so to me?"

"Come, let's have no quarrelling," observed Dick Melmoth. "We've too much of it sometimes."

"And whose fault is that?" demanded Coffin, savagely. "Don't I keep you well—feed you well —and give you plenty of pocket-money? What more do you want?"—and he eyed the young men ferociously, one after the other.

They seemed to understand his humour, and

made no reply, for fear of aggravating him; and he was somewhat softened by this apparent submissiveness on their part.

"Well, I can't say that I've much to complain of against you," he observed: "only I can't bear sharp answers. What are you looking at, Jack?"

"This picture of Dick Turpin hanging," was the response. "I think Turpin was a very fine fellow—and I'm never tired of looking at the picture. What a shame it was to send such a chap to the gibbet. But did he really wear a laced coat like that?"

"To be sure he did," answered the Hangman. "He was a very spicy cove in his togs, and always looked as if he belonged to swell street. It's more than seventy years ago since he was scragged. My father saw him turned off: it was at Tyburn. As he went up the ladder his right leg seemed to tremble for a moment: but he stamped it down hard—like that," said Coffin, suiting the action to the word and making the whole crazy building shake from bottom to top with the force of his foot. "When he'd stamped in that manner, Turpin looked round with a dauntless air upon the multitude, and received three cheers. Ah! that must have been a proud moment for him," added Jack Ketch, shaking his head slowly and with a look of envy.

But at this moment two or three customers entered the shop; and the Hangman's anecdotes, which by the bye he delighted to tell, were cut suddenly short, at least for the time being. He and his assistants began to lather and shave away; and a miscellaneous conversation was kept up the whole time. A succession of customers continued to arrive in sufficient numbers to keep Coffin, Dick, and the Foundling fully employed for the next hour; and during that period all kinds of things were discussed. The latest broils in the neighbourhood—the approaching sessions at the Old Bailey—the conduct of the last men who had been hung—the exploits of skilful and well known thieves—the quality of the liquor at the various public-houses in the neighbourhood—the recent prize-fights—the severity of the tax-gatherers—the latest rows in the Fleet prison—some attempted escapes from Newgate—the comparative merits of notorious highwaymen, dead or living—and anecdotes of clever Old Bailey pleaders,—these topics formed the staple of the discourse.

By half-past eight the business began to slacken; and towards nine the habitual frequenters of the shop were all disposed of. Dick Melmoth and the Foundling then went into the adjoining room to get their breakfast; and the Hangman posted himself on the threshold of the door to "catch a whiff of air," as he said, after the bustle and heat of his morning's avocations.

Having remained there for a few minutes, thinking over the adventures at the dark crib in Jacob's Island, he was about to follow his assistants into the parlour, when he suddenly observed no less a person than Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the chief officer of Bow Street, coming down the lane from the direction of Newgate. A pang of uneasiness shot through the heart of Jack Ketch at the sight of this formidable functionary—especially as the recent crime of the Folly Bridges was at the instant uppermost in his memory: but he as promptly composed himself with the reflection that if Larry, as he was familiarly called, meant mischief, he would not be coming alone nor in such an indifferent leisurely manner as that at which he was now advancing. Besides, the Hangman felt well assured that the crime could not possibly be known as yet, even if it were ever destined to transpire at all; and as for any information that the young lady might have given relative to her adventures at the dark crib, it could not be otherwise than exceedingly vague, and must necessarily stop short of the chapter that contained the crowning tragedy of the night.

Having thus rapidly reasoned to himself, Daniel Coffin recovered all his wonted equanimity and dogged indifference by the time Mr. Lawrence Sampson came near his door.

This individual, who has already been more than once alluded to in our pages, was the most celebrated thief-taker of the time. Not that he had ever performed any remarkable acts of desperate valour: but his skill in the process of detecting a criminal or unravelling the most intricate skein of mysterious crime, was extraordinary. Nothing could equal his shrewdness in catching up the faintest circumstance that might afford a clue to the object of his search or the aim of his investigation. Incidents, so trivial that even the astutest of his colleagues would have passed them over unnoticed, were by him seized upon as straws showing which way the wind blew;—and his keenness in getting upon the trail of a criminal was only equalled by his unwearying perseverance and consummate art in following up the scent. Marvellous tales are told of the searching penetration and wondrous ingenuity of the Red Indians in thus detecting an enemy's track and pursuing the chase, even though rivers should have been crossed and the trail thus broken suddenly: but nothing of the kind that is related concerning the savage aboriginals of North America could possibly exceed in vivid interest and astonishing skill the exploits of Lawrence Sampson when unravelling the mysteries of London crime or employed in the detection of its hidden perpetrators.

In physical construction he seemed but little adapted for so perilous, fatiguing, and harassing a life. Slightly formed, he was what is called a dapper-looking man; and though he was remarkably active, his muscular strength was by no means great. He dressed with great plainness, and had not the least air of protension about him: nor was there any expression of vulgar cunning in his countenance. His looks had a certain keenness and his lips denoted the utmost decision of character: but as he walked along the street, he did not appear to take any inordinate notice of either men or things. He had sleek red hair, a very freckled face, and large greenish eyes; and his age might be about eight-and-thirty.

Such was the famous Larry Sampson, the head officer of Bow Street.

That he should now be coming from the direction of Newgate, was nothing extraordinary, inasmuch as his avocations necessarily rendered him a frequent visitor to that gaol; and that he should be passing down Fleet Lane was also natural enough, seeing that it afforded the shortest cut into Farringdon Street, supposing that he was on his way straight back to Bow Street. Indeed, there was scarcely a week in which Sampson did not visit Newgate a dozen times, and take Fleet Lane in his way, either coming or going, on at least six or eight of those occasions. All these reflections did the Hangman make in the course of a few moments; and the result was a perfect men-

tal easiness as to the presence of the officer in his neighbourhood.

"Holloa, Mr. Sampson!" he exclaimed, as Larry seemed about to pass on the opposite side of the way without noticing him: "how are you, this morning sir?"

"Ah! Daniel," cried the functionary, stopping short: "I really did not observe you at the moment, nor yet recollect that I was going by your house. In fact I was thinking of some information which I have received from a fellow in Newgate, who has peached against his comrades in a job that was done down in the country some months ago."

"You're always on the look-out, Mr. Sampson," observed Jack Ketch, now totally relieved of any little lingering apprehension or misgiving that might have remained in his mind relative to Larry's presence in Fleet Lane so soon after the tragedy of the Folly Bridges.

"Well, I am obliged to be pretty sharp, Daniel, at times," said the officer. "But business never was so slack as at the present moment."

"Nothing doing, eh, Mr. Sampson?" remarked Coffin.

"Nothing of any consequence," was the reply. "Indeed I had not a single job in hand till I got this little information just now at Newgate: and I was thinking yesterday of going out of town for a few days' holiday."

"Well, why don't you, sir?" said the Hangman. "I'm sure no one deserves a holiday more than you do: you have worked hard enough in your time and sent a shoal of rascals through my hands. Ah! sir, many a fellow that you begun with I've finished with: the officer first—the executioner last. That's the way of the world."

"Why, you are moralizing, Daniel," exclaimed Sampson, with a laugh. "I have half a mind to treat you to a pot of egg-flip at the public house, only I am afraid of making your hand unsteady for shaving."

"Well, thank'ee, sir," said the Hangman, "I don't care about liquor this morning—I mean so early in the morning. I drank a little too much last night and feel out of sorts."

"What? Keeping it up at the public-house down at the corner—eh?" observed Larry, with another good-natured smile. "I dare say you spent last night the produce of all the beards that had blunted your razor in the morning. But talking of razors puts me in mind that I came out unshaved: and so you shall operate upon me, Daniel."

"You do me honour, Mr. Sampson," said Jack Ketch. "Walk in, sir."

Larry accordingly entered the shop—sate down—and resigned himself to the tonsorial skill of the Hangman.

This miscreant had often wondered whether his secret mode of life was at all suspected by Sampson; and his guilty conscience had on several occasions led him to fancy that the officer eyed him with a degree of suspicion. But that functionary's present conduct was a complete reassurance in respect to all past misgivings: for as the Hangman deftly manipulated the razor over Larry's chin, he thought to himself, "If he did know any ill concerning me, he would naturally fancy that I must suspect he had acquired this knowledge; and he would not in such a case trust his life in my hands as he is doing at this moment. One single gash across the carotid—and all would be over with Mr. Lawrence Sampson! But, no—he has not an idea that I am anything besides a penny barber and the public executioner: and I may make myself perfectly easy on this head."

These reflections swept through the Hangman's brain during the first minute that he was shaving the officer: and then, for an instant—but only for an instant—he thought what a good thing it would be for the whole tribe of criminals in London if he were just to draw his razor across Sampson's throat. But the idea was instantaneously discarded—not through any sudden fit of compunction, but because detection must instantaneously follow the committal of such a desperate deed in an open shop at broad day-light. Nevertheless the thought *was* entertained by the Hangman for a moment—though only a single moment. The temptation was so great: the throat was so conveniently held up—the razor so handy! And then there was the momentary indefinable impulse to do the deed—just as the individual leaning over a precipice or the parapet of a high tower, longs to leap down in spite of himself. Verily, for a single instant did Mr. Lawrence Sampson's life hang by a thread: and if he had known the nature of the idea which thus seized for that moment, with the gripe of a demon, upon the mind of Daniel Coffin, he would not probably have continued to sit so calmly and confidently as he did.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOUNDLING.

"You must see a number of strange faces from day to day, Daniel," observed Mr. Sampson, as he rose from the chair and proceeded to wash the remains of the lather from his face.

"Ah! you're right, sir,—I believe you," returned the Hangman: "some very queer customers at times. There's many a man I've shaved in this room and afterwards tucked up in the Old Bailey. You remember Peter Pluffers, Mr. Sampson?"

"Who committed the horrid murder down in Chelsea, you mean?" said Larry. "Why, I rather think that it was I who traced the crime to him and got up all the evidence that was brought forward at the trial."

"To be sure—so it was!" exclaimed the Hangman. "Well, sir, the very day after the murder he came and got shaved here, and talked about it with as much coolness as if he was as innocent as a lamb. Of course I hadn't the least suspicion concerning him; and I little thought as I lathered his throat that I should put a hempen neckcloth round it precisely that day four weeks. But so it was: and when we stood on the drop together, just as I was going to pull the night-cap down over his face, he says, '*Dan'el*,' says he, '*do you recollect shaving me just this day month?*'—'*To be sure I do, Peter*,' says I.—'*Well*,' says he, '*when I felt your hand touch my neck on that occasion, I had a sort of a sensation come over me all no how, but just like a secret warning at the moment that your fingers would soon touch my neck for another pur-*

pose.'—And so it was, you see, Mr. Sampson," added Jack Ketch, as he coolly stropped his razor.

"But you not only witness strange coincidences, Daniel," observed the officer: "you must likewise hear strange things. For we all know that a barber's shop is the regular place for a good gossip. By the bye, you may as well cut my hair a little, while I have got my coat and cravat off:"—and Mr. Sampson resumed his seat.

"With much pleasure, sir," exclaimed the Hangman, laying down the razor and taking up the scissors.

At this moment a poor costermonger entered the shop to be shaved; and Coffin summoned his junior assistant, Jack the Foundling, to operate upon the man.

"You have a fine young fellow there as an apprentice, Daniel," observed the officer: "a very fine young fellow, indeed."

"He's not an apprentice, sir—only an assistant—but he lives with me altogether," said the Hangman. "Jack, this is Mr. Lawrence Sampson——"

"I know the gentleman well enough," remarked the Foundling, eyeing the officer with the deepest respect. "I don't like his profession, though: but I think him the greatest man that ever belonged to it all the same."

"I am much obliged to you for the compliment," said Larry, with a smile.

"I've read the history of Jonathan Wild, the celebrated thief-taker," continued the Foundling, as he soaped the costermonger's face: "but he was a vulgar, common kind of thief-taker in comparison with you, Mr. Sampson. Besides, he was a precious scoundrel——"

"And you mean that I am not?" observed Larry, in a mild tone of good-humour, as he perceived the young man had stopped short with sudden confusion and embarrassment. "Come, explain yourself—and whatever you may say, I shall not be in the least offended, I can assure you."

"Well, sir," resumed the Foundling, "I was going to observe that Jonathan Wild was a thundering rascal, because he employed thieves and then turned round upon them and handed them over to justice. But you do nothing of the kind; and you follow your calling openly and straightforward. I'm not such a fool as to believe but what such persons as yourself are necessary; and therefore no one can blame you for being an officer. But if you was like Jonathan Wild, I should think no more of sticking a knife into you——"

"Halloa! what's that?" growled the Hangman, savagely. "Who told you, Master Jack, to talk in that style? I'm sure I've brought you morally and respectably since you first came to live with me—I had you learned to read and write, of which you was as ignorant as the cross-beam of the gibbet——"

"Well, I know all that, Mr. Coffin," interrupted the young man, hastily. "I didn't mean any harm by what I said—and as Mr. Sampson told me to speak out plainly——"

"To be sure I did," continued Larry. "Don't be angry with him, Daniel," he observed, addressing himself to the Hangman: "he has said nothing to give me offence. What books are you most fond of reading, my lad?" he inquired, again speaking to the assistant.

"Everything about robbers, pirates, highwaymen, and banditti," answered the Foundling. "I wish you would put all your adventures, Mr. Sampson, into a book and print it: I should be the first to buy a copy. What things you must have seen and heard!" he exclaimed, with a look of wonder and curiosity at the renowned thief-taker.

"Well, I have got a curious note-book at home," said Larry: "and I may show you a few things in it one of these days."

"Oh! thank you, sir—thank you!" exclaimed the Foundling, joyfully. "When do you think you could make it convenient——"

"Come, Jack," interrupted the Hangman, "you must not press Mr. Sampson like this. Whenever he has got a leisure day, I have no doubt he will be kind enough to recollect his promise. But if Mr. Sampson would condescend to put his feet under my table and take a little friendly dinner with me——"

"Well, we shall see about that one of these days," observed Larry. "But I was telling you just now that I am so slack of occupation at present I was thinking of taking a trip into the country. Now, if you can spare your assistant for a couple of days, he shall come and pass them with me; and I will endeavour to amuse him."

"You do him a very great honour, sir," replied the Hangman, who all along had adopted a submissive and respectful bearing towards the celebrated thief-taker: and with evident satisfaction at the proposal just made, he added, "I'm sure Jack will be delighted to accept your kind invitation."

"Then put up your little necessaries in a bundle and come along with me at once," said Mr. Sampson, the cutting of whose hair was just finished.

"I shan't be a moment, sir!" exclaimed the Foundling, his eyes beaming with joy: and having hastily snatched off the towel from the costermonger's face and flung down the razor and lather-brush, he hurried up stairs to his bed room.

"I'll just tell him to put on his best clothes, sir," remarked the Hangman: and without waiting for a reply, he hastened after his young assistant.

On reaching the lad's chamber, Daniel Coffin found him already getting out his Sunday apparel and clean linen to put on; while a handkerchief was spread out upon the bed to receive the other articles of clothing and little necessaries which he purposed to tie up in it.

"Jack," said the Hangman, in a tone unusually kind and conciliatory, "I'm devilish glad Larry Sampson has taken you by the hand in this way. You will want some pocket-money, my lad—because you must cut a decent figure at Larry's house; and so here's a couple of guineas for you."

"Thank'ee, Mr. Coffin," returned the Foundling, as he consigned the coins to his pocket. "I shall keep my eyes and my ears well open while I'm with Mr. Sampson."

"That's just what I want, Jack," exclaimed the Hangman. "You must endeavour to get as deep an insight as possible into all his dodges, and learn as much of his craft as you can."

"Oh! you needn't fear but what I shall do that," answered the lad, as he proceeded with his hasty toilet.

"And also try and find out whether he entertains any suspicion about me, Jack," continued the Hangman. "I don't think he does—indeed, I'm almost certain he doesn't: but still it's just as well to ascertain the exact truth."

"Depend upon it, Mr. Coffin," responded the Foundling, "I'll suck him as far as such a leary cove can be sucked at all."

"And if he wants you to stay any longer with him than the two days, don't refuse, Jack," said the Hangman: "I can very well spare you for such a purpose—and if you succeed in getting any useful information out of Larry, I'll give you five guineas for yourself and a week's holiday to spend 'em in."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Coffin—I'll do my best," exclaimed the Foundling, as he completed his hurried toilet. "And now I'll just say good bye to Dick and Sally—and then I'll be off with the thief-catcher."

In the meantime Larry Sampson had been left alone in the shop for a few minutes,—the costermonger having taken his departure the moment he was shaven. While brushing his hair, the officer looked leisurely and steadily round the place, his eyes seeming to penetrate into every nook, corner, and crevice. The piece of paper on which the Hangman had wiped the soap off his razor, had been tossed into the grate: Larry's keen look observed writing upon it—and he picked it up. A hasty glance over it was sufficient to induce him to keep it: he accordingly folded it up and consigned it to his waistcoat pocket.

Presently Jack the Foundling re-appeared, dressed somewhat flashily, and with the bundle in his hand; and Larry, having taken his leave of the Hangman, departed in company with the youthful assistant In Farringdon Street they entered a hackney coach, and were thence driven to Mr. Sampson's house in Long Acre.

The Bow Street functionary was unmarried, and possessed a neat bachelor residence. He had his dining-room and breakfast-parlour — his drawing-room and bed-chamber—and in addition thereto, a private apartment into which no one save himself and housekeeper ever entered. He was well off, his avocations having proved most lucrative; and if he now continued them, it was from habit and also from an aversion to idleness rather than from a positive love of gain. His housekeeper was an elderly female of the highest respectability, and who was generally called Dame Margery by Sampson and his friends, or Mrs. Margery by the servant-of-all-work and the tradespeople.

When Sampson introduced Jack the Foundling to the Dame, and quietly observed that he was one of Daniel Coffin's assistants who had come to pass a day or two with him, the worthy woman neither manifested surprise nor displeasure that her master should bring home such queer company: for she knew full well that Larry must have some deep design or powerful motive of his own in adopting such a course. She therefore welcomed the Foundling kindly, and at once showed him to the chamber which was to be his own while he remained at the house.

Having unpacked his little bundle of necessaries, given his hair another brush, and satisfied himself by a good long stare in the mirror that "he was quite the thing," the Foundling returned to the parlour where a copious breakfast had been put on the table during his temporary absence. The eyes of the young man were regaled and his appetite sharpened by the view of cold veal pie, a fine ham, rashers of bacon and eggs, and all the usual accessories to the morning's repast.

"Now," said Larry, in a plain and unostentatious manner, "you are going to make yourself quite at home during your visit to me; and on my side, I do not intend to treat you as a stranger. So please to sit down and partake of just what you like. If you don't fancy chocolate or coffee, which are both on the table, you can have wine, spirits, or malt liquor. Only say the word, and your wishes shall be complied with."

The Foundling thanked Mr. Sampson for his kindness, but assured him that he required nothing beyond what was now before him. Having been called away from his own breakfast in Fleet Lane to operate upon the costermonger's beard, the young man found plenty of appetite for the present banquet, as the repast really was in his eyes. He accordingly fell to work in good earnest, and made considerable havoc upon the various viands that appeared upon the board. When he had eaten as much as he could and had disposed of his third cup of chocolate, his hospitable entertainer poured him out a glass of some rich French cordial; and the young man already began to think to himself how agreeable it would be to dwell in such comfortable quarters for the remainder of his days.

"And now, my young friend," said Mr. Sampson, when the breakfast table was cleared, "you will permit me to have a little conversation with you; —for I must tell you candidly that I have taken an interest in your welfare, which is not the less sincere on account of its being so suddenly inspired. Tell me, then, any particulars concerning yourself which you may choose to mention."

"In the first place, sir," answered the young man, whose heart was warmed towards his entertainer by the good cheer so hospitably provided and so copiously partaken of, "I must tell you that I have no other name, to my knowledge, except Jack the Foundling."

"Did you never know your parents?" inquired Sampson.

"Never, sir. I was brought up in a place which you must know very well by name—the Kinchin-Ken* in Grub Street."

"I do know it well," observed the Bow Street officer. "And now you need not mind telling me anything you choose about yourself or any misdeeds that you have committed: for I would sooner render you a service than do you an injury—and I have some scheme in my head regarding you—a scheme which you will perhaps be glad to hear explained. But all depends upon your frankness and candour towards me. In a single word, I will be your friend, if you prove yourself deserving of my friendship. Come — take another glass of this cordial: it will give you courage to enter into particulars that are not perhaps the most pleasant for your feelings or your recollections."

"Depend upon it I will deal candidly with you, sir," replied the Foundling: then, having tossed off the *liqueur*, he felt the warmth of his heart in-

* Literally "children's house:" really a place for juvenile thieves of both sexes.

LOUISA STANLEY.

creasing towards Mr. Lawrence Sampson. "You speak of my recollections, sir," he continued,—"why, the earliest recollections that I have are associated with that Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street. It seems, from all I have ever been able to learn relative to myself, that I was stolen from my parents when a baby and brought up by a woman named Shickster Sal."*

"I knew her," observed Sampson. "She was the mistress of the fellow who presided over the gang of juvenile thieves frequenting the Kinchin-Ken, and who bears the name of the Kinchin-Grand to the present day, although the nest of iniquity has been broken up. Shickster Sal has been dead some years: but the Kinchin-Grand is still alive and in London."

"Yes—he seems to have abandoned his old ways and now keeps a small chandler's-shop on Mutton Hill, Clerkenwell. But, talking of myself," continued the Foundling, "I was going to tell you that although Shickster Sal brought me up, as one may say,—such a bringing up as it was!—yet I was more indebted to two other persons, who were then mere children themselves, for any kindness that was bestowed upon my infancy. These persons were Richard and Sarah Melmoth——"

"I know who they are," observed Larry Sampson, in his quiet way. "Dick Melmoth is your fellow-assistant at Coffin's shop—and Sally Melmoth is Coffin's housekeeper. Their father committed some dreadful crimes about nineteen or twenty years ago, and then put a period to his own existence. His eldest son, James—the brother of Richard and Sarah now living—also met a violent death just at the same time as his father. The lad threw some horrible missile at a nobleman in

* *Shickster* means "Lady:" the appellation was given because the young woman referred to had been well brought up in her earlier years, before she fell into depraved society and profligate habits.

Grafton Street, and was killed at the same time as his victim."

"So I have been told," said the young man: "and what is more, it was that very same lad, James Melmoth, who originally brought me, when a baby a few months old, to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub street. He found me, it was said—or else he himself was the person who stole me: but whichever it was, I have never been able to learn. At all events, his surviving brother and sister got to like me just as if I was *their* brother—and so I was brought up amongst the juvenile thieves, blackguards, and prostitutes of the precious den in Grub Street. You can guess, Mr. Sampson, what were the lessons I learnt for some years, till Mr. Coffin took us all three to live in his house. That was about eight or nine years ago: and ever since then we've remained there."

"And you have of course been happier," observed the Bow Street officer. "You have learnt to read and write——"

"Well, sir," interrupted the Foundling, "I'll tell you how it was. It seems that Dick Melmoth was eight years old when his father killed himself: and until within a few months of that event, the Melmoth family had been respectably brought up. It was some terrible series of misfortunes that broke up their home—killed the mother—and drove the father pretty near wild. Previous to those misfortunes, I was saying, his conduct was very different; which was proved by the circumstance that Dick could read quite well and write tolerably—aye, and say his prayers too. So when Dick and Sal were left all alone in the world and flung amongst the kinchin-prigs* at the ken in Grub Street, the brother found time to teach his little sister to read and write, although they went out begging or stealing all day. Well, after we went to live with Mr. Coffin, Dick used to read any books that fell in his way; and he one day read the life of Jonathan Wild aloud. I was so delighted that I was determined to be able to read that and other books for myself; and so I got Dick to teach me. As soon as I was able to read, he taught me to write—and then I went on improving myself."

"And so this is the boasted kindness of Mr. Coffin towards you—eh?" exclaimed Larry Sampson, laughing. "Why, to hear him talk just now, one would have thought that he had engaged a tutor to instruct you. But I suppose he took a certain degree of merit to himself in the circumstance that you learnt to read and write at *his* house. However, it is much to your credit that you have thus become enabled to read and write at all; though I think your selection of books does not appear to have been the wisest."

"But consider how I was brought up, Mr. Sampson," exclaimed the young man, earnestly—for he experienced a profound desire to ingratiate himself into the favour of the Bow Street officer—not only because this individual had hinted at his intention to do something for him, but also because he was now conversing for the first time in his life with some one who deprecated the ways of profligacy and vice instead of encouraging him to pursue them.

"Yes—I make every allowance for the way in which you were reared and trained, young man," said the officer; "and I sympathise with you. Few people have better opportunities than I of understanding and appreciating all that there is dreadful, wretched, and deplorable in the condition of those unfortunate beings who are made outcasts from society by circumstances rather than by their own innate predisposition to vice. I have seen and heard enough, during my long experience as an officer of justice, to be convinced that the whole social system is rotten at its core. There is a small but highly favoured class in the community which monopolises everything—and the inevitable consequence is a wide-spread pauperism amongst the masses. From this pauperism all species of demoralization, vice, iniquity, and crime are necessarily engendered; and those unfortunates whom we call the *outcasts* of society, are in reality its *victims*."

"Ah! sir," exclaimed the Foundling, strangely excited and deeply moved by the observations which he had just heard: "you have only expressed in words certain ideas which have for some time past been floating, vaguely and dimly, as one may say, in my imagination. You have suddenly given form, and shape, and substance to those images which have been flitting for two or three years before my mind's eye. For whenever I have reflected upon the misdeeds of my own life, I have asked myself how I could possibly help being what I have been or what I am! The king's own son, if brought up as I was, and under precisely the same circumstances, would be exactly like me: he would have gone through the same ordeal—have done the same things—have had his mind trained and his course shaped in the same direction. I have known what it is, sir, when quite a child, to go through the streets, shoeless and in rags—shivering with the bitter cold, and crying for hunger. That was before I was old enough to steal for myself, and when my companions were either hiding from the officers of justice or had been so unsuccessful in their own thieving pursuits as to want even a morsel of bread for themselves. I have endured every kind of privation: and I have likewise been steeped to the lips in all profligacies. When I was only nine years old I was had up before the magistrate for begging. I told him that I had neither father or mother—or at least, that I did not know them. He sent me to the House of Correction, where I was half starved and brutally treated. Two years afterwards, when I was eleven, I was had up again: but this time it was thieving. I was sent to gaol; and there I was well fed and well treated. Of course, when I came out I preferred thieving to begging. For either the one or the other I was liable to be taken up, both being crimes: but the thief being treated better than the beggar, it was natural I should choose the pursuit of the former. Soon afterwards I was taken to live with Mr. Coffin: or else I should have gone on as a petty thief up to this day. And now, perhaps, you will spurn me from you, since I have told you that I have been in prison as a thief——"

"Not a bit of it, my poor lad," exclaimed Sampson, taking his hand. "I am only surprised that half your life has not been passed in prisons. But the subject is now becoming painful to you—and we will postpone the farther discussion of it until the evening. You have been talking a long time—and it is my turn to do something to entertain you."

* Juvenile thieves.

Larry Sampson accordingly began to narrate several anecdotes of his exploits in detecting notorious offenders and bringing them to justice: but we must now take leave of him and Jack the Foundling for the present, in order to direct the reader's attention to matters of a still more interesting and important nature.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE REVELATION OF THE CONSPIRACY.

THE reader will be pleased to remember that the day of which we are now writing is Thursday—the incidents at Jacob's Island having occurred during the Wednesday night.

It was about ten in the morning, that Jocelyn Loftus issued forth from the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, where he was staying. On the previous day he had called in Stratton Street to inquire for Clara Stanley, but was told that she was out of town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford. It however appeared that they were expected home in the evening; and Jocelyn, having left the letter of introduction which his beloved Louisa had given him for her sister, desired the servant to say that he would call again the next morning.

He was therefore now on his way to Stratton Street: and taking the nearest cut from Covent Garden, through Leicester Square, into Piccadilly, he pursued his course at a somewhat brisk pace. He had reached the angle of Albemarle Street and was traversing the crossing, when his attention was suddenly drawn towards a young lady who hurried past him in so wild a manner that it appeared as if she were either demented or labouring under some extraordinary agitation. Turning sharply round the corner into Albemarle Street, she suddenly stopped short—seemed to reflect for a few moments—and then staggered against some iron railings as if she were about to fall down in a fit.

Jocelyn observed that she was very young—perhaps not more than sixteen—and that although she was handsomely dressed, her apparel was dirty and travel-soiled. Indeed, she looked as if she had been journeying a considerable distance on foot: and this circumstance, added to her evident distress of mind, instantaneously led the young gentleman to believe that she must be in some peculiar position of difficulty, danger, or embarrassment. His generous nature now prompted him to ascertain if he could possibly be of any service to her: for he well knew how perilous it was for so young a creature, and beautiful withal, to wander friendless and unprotected in the mighty mazes of the modern Babylon.

He therefore accosted her: but she did not immediately observe him;—and as she leant against the railings of some lordly mansion, he heard her exclaim to herself, "No—no—I will not go to *him!* He is one of the conspirators—he is as bad as the rest!"

A convulsive sob followed these words, choking any farther utterance of the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind: and turning abruptly round, she was about to retrace her hurried way into Piccadilly, when she beheld Jocelyn Loftus surveying her with a look of unmistakable compassion and respectful interest. She then seemed all in a moment to recollect that he must have caught the words which fell so agonizingly from her lips: and a deep blush overspread her countenance at the thought of the notice her extraordinary behaviour had thus attracted towards herself.

"Pardon the boldness of a total stranger thus venturing to address you," Jocelyn hastened to observe: "but if you have lost your way—or if there be any service which I can render you——"

"Yes, sir—yes—there is indeed a service which you can render me, if you be sincere and right-minded," exclaimed the young lady: then, instantaneously checking the wildness of her manner, she said, "But I have no right to address you in this style—I have no reason to meet your evident frankness with a base suspicion——"

"You are evidently labouring under a considerable degree of excitement," observed Jocelyn, in a tone of the kindest reassurance; "and I cannot be offended at anything you may say. I am a gentleman——but what is much more, I am a man of honour, and therefore incapable of treating you otherwise than with respectful consideration."

"I believe you, sir—I put implicit faith in you," said the young lady. "But what can you do for me?" she asked, her looks again resuming that wildness which Jocelyn had before noticed: and then the next moment, the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You observed ere now," said Loftus, "that there was some service which I might render you. Believe me, young lady, that it must be an impossible one if I should refuse to succour a being so profoundly afflicted as you evidently are."

"Will you give me a home, sir?" she inquired, passionately: "and will that home be an honourable one? But, no—I do not demand so much at your hands," she instantaneously added: "if you will assist me to obtain a respectable lodging, where I may at least enjoy personal security, I will thank you — Oh! most cordially thank you! Though utterly without friends, I am not destitute of immediate resources——"

"We are attracting unpleasant notice," said Jocelyn. "Permit me to call a hackney-coach—and I will escort you to a place both of respectability and safety."

The young lady expressed her gratitude—a vehicle which was passing at the time, stopped in obedience to Jocelyn's summons—and he handed the fair stranger into it. Then, entering it also and placing himself on the seat opposite to her, he commanded the driver to take them to the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden.

"I am only staying for a short time—indeed, I may say for only a few more hours—in London," he observed, as the hackney-coach moved on: "and I have no fixed residence of my own in this great city. But I will confide you to the care of the landlady of the hotel to which we are now proceeding; and though I shall be obliged to leave you again almost immediately, having a particular appointment to keep, I shall return in an hour or two. During that interval you will have gained some degree of composure—and you can then explain to me how I may farther serve you."

"Your kindness—your generosity will receive my eternal gratitude," said the young lady, burst-

ing into tears. "But, Oh! do not think ill of me—do not prejudge me, because you found me a friendless, homeless, unprotected wanderer! My story is a melancholy one—but it contains no narrative of guilt or frailty on my part——"

"Do not distress yourself, I implore you," exclaimed Jocelyn, "by even fancying for a moment that these assurances are necessary to interest me in your behalf. Presently you shall have an opportunity of giving me such explanations as you may volunteer: but remember that I seek them not as a right—much less as a condition of any service which I may have an opportunity of rendering you."

In this strain did the generous-hearted, noble-minded young man reassure and console the afflicted young lady; and by the time they reached the Piazza Hotel in Covent Garden, her agitation had completely subsided—a profound melancholy however succeeding it.

The mistress of the establishment was a worthy matron to whom Jocelyn had no hesitation nor scruple in confiding his fair companion: then, having reiterated his promise to return in an hour or two, he directed the hackney-coach to be driven back to Piccadilly, and in due time was set down in Stratton Street. To his inquiry at the mansion which bore the number of 13 upon the front door, he was informed that Miss Clara Stanley was now at home; and he was immediately conducted into a handsome drawing-room, where he found himself in the presence of a young lady of remarkable beauty, who rose from her seat and advanced with cordial manner to welcome him.

The impression mutually made at this first meeting of Clara Stanley and her sister's intended husband, was unexceptionably favourable. Jocelyn beheld before him a lady-like, charming, and unaffected being, who appeared to have acquired just a sufficiency of the polish of good society to supersede the awkwardness and embarrassment arising from a secluded life in the country, without any of the airs or artificial assumptions which too often accompany the refinement of what is called the fashionable world. On the other hand, Clara found herself in the presence of a handsome, elegant, and prepossessing young man, whose goodness of heart and intellectual superiority were plainly legible in his looks.

They sate down and began to converse. Clara naturally asked a thousand questions relative to her sister, all of which denoted the deeply-seated affection she experienced for that much-loved, amiable, gentle girl: she likewise spoke of her afflicted aunt—and then the tears for a few moments rained down her cheeks. Jocelyn, having responded to all her queries, proceeded to state that he had come up to London on purpose to arrange certain affairs previous to his marriage with Louisa; and he expressed a hope that when the bridal day arrived, Miss Clara Stanley would be enabled to leave London and be present at Canterbury on the occasion. The young lady replied that nothing should prevent her from acting in accordance with Jocelyn's and her sister's desire in this respect: and she then proceeded to express her regret that she could not have the pleasure of introducing Mr. Loftus to Mr. and Mrs. Beckford on the present occasion, as they were very old people and much fatigued with their excursion into the country on the preceding day. But she assured him that, through the attachment they had conceived for herself, they felt the liveliest interest in everything that concerned her sister, and would be happy to avail themselves of the earliest opportunity in future to form the acquaintance both of Louisa and Jocelyn. Clara likewise observed she thought it more than possible, and indeed almost certain, that Mr. and Mrs. Beckford would accompany her to Canterbury on the occasion of the approaching nuptials; and then, in allusion to herself, she remarked that the only manner in which she could testify her gratitude towards the kind benefactors who had adopted her as their daughter and intended to leave her all their fortune, was by remaining constantly with them. It was this feeling, she added, which had prevented her from paying even the shortest and most hurried visit to Canterbury to see her sister; and Jocelyn readily appreciated and acknowledged the force of Clara's observations in this respect.

In this manner did Loftus and Miss Stanley converse for upwards of an hour, the favourable impression mutually made at first being strengthened and confirmed by the protraction of the interview; and when Jocelyn rose to take his leave, Clara begged him to become the bearer of a letter and a present which she had prepared for her sister. He of course assented: and she placed in his hands a small packet, which he promised to deliver to Louisa on his return to Canterbury. They then separated: but scarcely had the door closed behind the young gentleman, when Clara burst out into an agony of bitter weeping and convulsive sobs, as if her surcharged bosom were now enabled, the instant she was alone, to find a vent for the feelings which she had been forced not only to stifle, but even to mask beneath smiles and an unnatural composure during the interview with her sister's intended husband.

On returning to the Piazza Hotel, Jocelyn Loftus inquired of the landlady concerning the afflicted young creature whom he had entrusted to her charge; and, on ascertaining that she was now comparatively tranquillised, he repaired to the apartment in which she was seated. The moment he entered, she began to express, with tears in her eyes, all the gratitude she experienced for the generous kindnes he had manifested towards her; and she besought him to listen to those explanations upon which she now felt herself in a fitting frame of mind to enter.

He accordingly took a seat near her; and she proceeded to address him in the following manner:—

"I have determined, Mr. Loftus,—for the mistress of this establishment has made me acquainted with your name,—to reveal to your ears all the dreadful secrets which now weigh upon my mind: for you have shown me so much kindness, that I must tax your generosity still farther by imploring your best advice and counsel. Listen then, I beseech you, to the extraordinary narrative which I am about to unfold; and I feel convinced that you will not regret the kindness you have already shown to a being so afflicted—so wretched—and yet so innocent as I."

There was a sincerity in the young lady's manner which confirmed the favourable opinion and strengthened the compassionate sympathy which Jocelyn had already experienced towards her; and

with a few kind words he encouraged her to proceed.

"I am the youngest of four sisters, living until yesterday with our widowed mother at Richmond," she continued; "and my name is Owen."

Loftus started visibly: then instantaneously checking his emotion or excitement, whatever the feeling might be, he said calmly, "I have heard of you before."

"Then perhaps you are aware," exclaimed Mary—for she it was,—"that the Royal Princes and several noblemen who are closely connected with them in the ties of friendship, have been constant visitors at our house—I fear," she added, with downcast eyes and a blushing countenance, "to the injury of our reputation."

"I am aware of the circumstance which you mention, Miss Owen," observed Loftus: "and I will not disguise the fact that scandal has busied itself with the name of your family. Is not the Marquis of Leveson one of the noblemen to whom you have alluded?"

"He is," replied Mary. "But permit me to give the details of my narrative in continuous order—and you will then understand the fearful secret which is the basis of that intimacy between my mother and the Royal Princes. It appears," continued the young lady, after a brief pause during which she collected her thoughts, "that from the first moment of the arrival in England of the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick, to become the wife of the Prince of Wales, she was destined to find a secret though remorseless and unrelenting enemy in the Queen.* For some years past a terrible conspiracy has been in existence against the unhappy Caroline. You are aware it was in 1795—nineteen years ago—that she became Princess of Wales. At the beginning of 1796 the Princess Charlotte was born: and from that period the Prince and Princess of Wales were completely estranged from each other. The Prince has declared that she shall never be Queen of England; and the mother, the present Queen, echoes the sentiment. I will not however extend my narrative unnecessarily. Suffice it to say that the Queen, the Prince Regent, two of his brothers, three or four noblemen, and four or five titled ladies, have all been leagued by solemn compact and in dread conspiracy for years past, to work the ruin of the Princess Caroline. Hence the investigation which took place in 1806, and which arose from the vile machinations, plots, and artifices of the conspirators. But her Royal Highness passed triumphantly through the ordeal, as you are doubtless well aware; and the conspirators were for the moment defeated. But they were not discouraged: and ever since have they been working, secretly but actively—pursuing their slimy ways like serpents in the grass—with all the resoluteness of their unpitying dispositions and fiendish purposes. In such an enterprise, however, the utmost delicacy and caution must necessarily be used; and the conspirators have determined to bide their time rather than precipitate matters so as to hazard another defeat. They know that each time a blow is struck, and that the Princess rises up unhurt from the assault, the effect is only to invest her cause with a larger amount of popularity and increase the odium attaching itself to her persecutors. In proportion to the sympathy bestowed upon the Princess by the naturally generous-hearted and noble-minded working-classes of England, so is the indignation excited against her enemies. All these facts have been well weighed by the conspirators; and they would consequently rather allow years to elapse while they draw in their snares and meshes closer around the Princess, than risk another failure by imprudent precipitation. They are now therefore working slowly—and they believe surely."

"Heavens! is it possible that such infamy can exist, and, in such high quarters?" exclaimed Jocelyn Loftus, his blood boiling with indignation and his eyes flashing fire. "Oh for the power—the means—the opportunity to warn the unhappy Princess of the tremendous perils by which she is environed——"

"You shall have all, Mr. Loftus—yes, all!" cried Mary, her countenance glowing with a kindred feeling of anger and disgust. "You shall have the power—the means—the opportunity: and God be thanked for having thrown in my way so generous a champion of the persecuted Caroline of Brunswick!"

"Continue your narrative, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn. "I will subdue my feelings while I listen to your dreadful tale."

"Amongst the various measures adopted to ensure the destruction of the Princess of Wales," resumed Mary, "is the scheme of surrounding her with the spies, creatures, and agents of the conspirators. Three or four years ago it was first suggested to the Prince Regent—I believe by the Marquis of Leveson—to train up an entire family of sisters to do this dreadful work. It was supposed, I should imagine, that several young ladies, thus closely connected by the ties of kinship, would be more certain to conduct their operations harmoniously, systematically, and confidentially, than a number of females having no such bond to unite them. The plan was greedily seized upon by the Prince Regent, the Queen, and the other conspirators: and the Marquis of Leveson then introduced the Royal Princes to our house. My mother corresponded

* In the First Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON," p. 219, Vol. II, the following passage occurred, descriptive of a hurried and whispered conversation between Queen Charlotte (George the Third's wife) and her son the Prince of Wales:—

"Put what construction you please upon my conduct, George," observed the Queen, after a few moment's consideration: "but let one thing at least be engraven on your memory—and let it serve as the text for all your self-communings at a future day!"—"And that one thing?" demanded the Prince, surveying his royal mother with mingled interest and curiosity. "What is it?"—"That in *me* the Princess Caroline has a bitter and an unforgiving enemy," rejoined the Queen, the words hissing snake-like through the lips that were white and quivering.—Bad and unprincipled as was the heir-apparent—heartless, cruel, and selfish as his disposition might be—he was nevertheless struck with a species of horror at this cold-blooded announcement on the part of his mother. A man may be a murderer himself, and can yet think well of human nature generally: but if he suddenly finds out that his own mother is a murderess—the being who possesses the *prestige* of all-excelling goodness in his eyes—his confidence in everything human is annihilated in an instant. Thus was it with the Prince of Wales. His own mother had suddenly thrown off the mask and revealed herself to him as a fiend in female shape:—and he gazed upon her in mingled horror, wonderment, and distress.—But she darted upon him a look full of contempt as much as to imply that even yet he did not half comprehend the true meaning of the words to which she had given utterance: then quitting him abruptly, she retired for the night.

with the Queen—and all was arranged. The project was to bend the minds of my sisters and myself to a thorough acquaintance with all species of refined duplicity and exquisite cunning—to render us plastic to every kind of artifice and deceit—to demoralize us thoroughly in mind, without actually destroying what the world would call our virtue. This process has been going on for four years. First, my eldest sister, when believed to be properly trained and broken into the specious system, was entrusted with the secret of its real motive: next my second sister was in due course initiated in the mysteries of the career for which she was destined;—then my third sister's turn came to receive the explanations;—and it was only on Tuesday last—the day before yesterday, in fact—that the veil was drawn away from before my own eyes. Oh! sir, it was dreadful—it was dreadful in the extreme—to hear a mother's lips inculcating such lessons as I then heard: but when I was told that arrangements had already been made for myself and my sisters to enter the service of the Princess of Wales, in the capacity of waiting-ladies, and that we were not only to become spies upon her actions but also to lay snares to entrap her into situations that would give her conduct the colour of guilt,—when I heard all this, I say, it seemed as if the very bottomless pit itself had suddenly opened at my feet, displaying all its ineffable horrors."

"Poor girl!" muttered Jocelyn, in a tone of deep compassion.

"Ah! sir, you may well pity me," exclaimed Mary, the tears streaming down her cheeks: then, hastily wiping them away, she said, "At first I was so astounded, amazed, and bewildered that I knew not what to think or how to act. But I will not trouble you with minute details relative to my own feelings; you will do me the credit to believe, sir, that they were harrowing and poignant in the extreme, though outwardly veiled, no doubt, by the sense of despair and consternation that was upon me. It was on Tuesday morning that my mother received a letter from her Majesty the Queen, stating that the time had now come for my sisters and myself to enter the service of the Princess of Wales. It appears that, whilst secretly plotting against the Princess, the Queen has all along pretended openly to be her friend; and they occasionally correspond. It was therefore an easy matter for her Majesty to recommend us to the notice of the Princess: and her Royal Highness was not likely to refuse the Queen's request that we should be thus taken into her household. The Princess, as you are of course aware, is now upon the Continent: and my mother having had an interview with the Prince Regent at Carlton House on Tuesday, returned home in the evening with the intimation that we were to proceed to Woolwich on the ensuing day and thence embark for France. Accordingly, every preparation being made, we yesterday repaired to Woolwich: but as the moment for embarkation drew nigh, my feelings became wrought up to such an intolerable pitch, that I penned a hasty note to my mother, and fled! In that note I declared how impossible it was for me to pursue the career for which I had been destined; and bidding farewell, in the hurried lines to my mother and sisters, I expressed a hope that God would soften their hearts to repentance. But I believe I appended an assurance to the effect that I would not betray them. However, I left the note for them—and fled precipitately from Woolwich. Avoiding the main road, I wandered hither and thither in all directions—not knowing what course to adopt,—at one moment maddened by my feelings—at another sitting down and giving vent to my grief in floods of tears."

"How you must have suffered!" exclaimed Jocelyn. "But you had no alternative than to flee from the bosom of your own family."

"Such was the thought continually uppermost in my mind," observed Mary: "and although I was horrified when I contemplated what was to become of me, yet I did not once repent the step I had taken. However—to be brief—after many, many hours' wandering, and far into the night too, I reached the suburbs of London. My object was to obtain some respectable lodging: but when I made inquiries to that effect, I received so many insults that at last I wandered on without daring to accost another soul. Exhausted with fatigue I sank down upon the steps of a door, thinking that my very existence was ebbing away. A young woman came up and spoke kindly to me. I was cheered, and readily accompanied her to a house which she alleged to be her own home. But scarcely had I lain down to rest, when I was startled from my sleep by the presence of a man who had stolen into the chamber to warn me that I was in a den of thieves and murderers. I fled—I succeeded in effecting my escape, although pursued by some of the inmates of the house; and some honest labourers whom I met conducted me to a tavern near London Bridge, where I found alike security and repose. On rising again, I asked myself what course I should adopt: and I thought of visiting the Marquis of Leveson—throwing myself upon his mercy—and beseeching him to see my mother on my behalf. But on entering Albemarle Street, where his lordship lives, my mind misgave me: I remembered how deeply he was concerned in the conspiracy against the Princess—I recollected how artfully, unwearyedly, and insidiously he had entered into the work of demoralizing the minds of my sisters and myself—and I dared not appeal to *him*. At that moment—in the moment of my bitter distress and blank despair—you addressed me, Mr. Loftus; and now you know all!"

"Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, "you have behaved in a manner which demands my esteem, as you had already obtained my sympathy. You have shrunk from the performance of a detestable part—and this would be a dreadful world indeed, if you were to be left friendless and an outcast on that account. You have solicited my advice—and I will give it: but you must first allow me to proffer you my friendship. I am engaged to be married to an excellent and amiable young lady who lives at Canterbury; and in her dwelling I can guarantee you an asylum until her union with me shall permit you to make my own house your home. Does this arrangement appear to suit you?—and will you accept it?"

"Oh! cheerfully—cheerfully!" exclaimed Mary, with tears of gratitude. "You are indeed a friend to me—and I will love your intended bride as if she were my sister. Yes—I accept your generous proposal with a fervid joy: for I dare not return

home to my mother—at least for the present—and I have no other friend but you."

"The business which has brought me to London is terminated," said Jocelyn; "and I care not how soon I set out on my return to Canterbury. If you feel yourself equal to the journey, after the night of wanderings, terrors, and brief slumber which you have passed, we will set out at once."

"I long—Oh! I long to leave London," exclaimed Mary: "for if I were to meet any of my mother's friends, I should be perhaps borne forcibly back to her—and she would overwhelm me with the bitterest reproaches for my conduct."

"We will lose no time in taking our departure," said Jocelyn. "It is now nearly one o'clock," he added, referring to his watch: "a post-chaise and four will bear us rapidly along—and by eight this evening we shall be in Canterbury."

Thus speaking, the young gentleman rang the bell to give the necessary orders for their departure.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WATCHERS AT THE GREEN DRAGON.

About the same hour at which the preceding conversation took place between Jocelyn Loftus and Mary Owen at the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, the redoubtable Captain Tash and his man Robin were thinking of lunch in an upper room at the *Green Dragon*, Knightsbridge.

These two worthies no longer formed items in the vast mass of the shabby-genteel tribe: they had cast their old skins and appeared in new ones with the bright gloss upon them. In plainer terms, they were each embellished with a bran new suit of clothes: but the influence of this great and striking personal improvement was very different in its effects upon the master and the man. For inasmuch as the former had become inflated with pride and pomposity to a degree that threw all his past self-sufficiency completely into the shade, the latter had grown more timid and bashful than ever, and did not seem to find any nook dark enough or any corner retired enough wherein to thrust and squeeze up his starveling person.

The Captain positively appeared to be in the hey-day of his glory. His dark hair all stuck out and his whiskers were as bushy as those of a bandit upon the stage or in pictures: his monstachios were glossy with pomatum and tremendously fierce; — and he looked as triumphant, as insolent, and as overbearing as if he were an aristocratic general who had just been cannonading the populace at the command of the Ministry. His face was terribly inflamed—and his nose was as rubicund as if it were cut out of beet-root. His new frock-coat was buttoned up to his throat, as usual: but he now wore long wristbands, as stiff as paste-board, and extending over his knuckles—as if he were resolved to defy the whole world to declare that he did not possess a shirt. His light grey trousers were ornamented with a thick stripe of lace on each leg: and, large as his spurs were wont to be, they were now an inch longer and kicked up a more diabolical rattling than ever.

The man Robin was apparelled in a new suit of black; and he had not only a clean shirt, but also a snow-white cravat. He seemed, however, so little at home in this state of outward renovation, that he was positively more afraid of attracting notice in his new dress than he was in his seedy garb. If he formerly looked like a decayed itinerant preacher, he now resembled a mute attired for a funeral and only wanting the mourning band to his hat.

The room in which we now find these worthies seated, at about one o'clock in the afternoon of that Thursday whereof we are writing, was on the third storey of the *Green Dragon* public-house. The Captain had chosen this apartment because it enabled him to command all the points of Acacia Cottage; and even if a waggon-load of hay should pass along the Knightsbridge Road, he could see over it, and thus was certain of never for an instant losing sight of the premises which he was engaged to watch. The window was kept open during the day; and Robin remained almost incessantly behind the curtain, peeping forth and with looks sharp as needles fixed on the front of Venetia's charming residence. The Captain was for the most part seated at a table, where he wrote down any particulars which Robin reported to him from his post at the window,—such as the visits paid to Acacia Cottage, the appearance of the visitors, whether they were in carriages or on foot, how long they remained, &c. &c.

But, as we have said, it being now one o'clock, the Captain had rung for lunch; and as the bell was not answered within the space of seven seconds from the moment he pulled the rope, he tore at it again with such violence as to make it continue ringing for upwards of a minute. The landlord—a meek, thin, timid, and obliging man—rushed frantically up stairs: but no sooner did he enter the room than he started back in dismay at the awful appearance of the Captain.

"Thunder and lightning, sirrah!" exclaimed this formidable individual, who had sprung up from his chair in a perfect fury: "what do you mean by keeping a gentleman of my rank—on officer, too, in his Majesty's service—waiting for his luncheon? Do you know, sirrah, that I've a great mind to have you lashed up to the triangle and make my man Robin there lay it on thick with a cat-o'-nine tails upon your bare back?"

"I'm really very sorry, Captain — exceedingly sorry," stammered the landlord, stepping back a pace every time the officer took one forward: "but you must excuse a *leetle* delay, sir."

"Delay, sirrah! I don't know what delay is. Have you got any kidneys?" he demanded sternly.

"Yes, sir—some very nice ones. But I hope that for old acquaintance' sake," added the landlord, with the utmost humility, "you will make allowance for the time required to run up three pair of stairs to answer your bell."

"Allowances, sirrah!" vociferated the Captain: "I know nothing of allowances—except of victuals and drink. Robin, do you know anything of allowances?"

"Nothing," replied the man, with his looks steadfastly fixed upon Acacia Cottage. "Please to write down something."

"Well—what is it?" exclaimed Tash, rushing back to his seat at the table and taking up his pen.

"Beggar-man with matches just stopped under

the windows of the Cottage—Miss Trelawney throws out something to him—think it's a penny—can't be sure—may be a halfpenny——"

"Oh! nonsense—humbug—trash!" cried the Captain, flinging down his pen and starting up again. "I told you before not to descend to such contemptible particulars as those. Neither the Earl nor the baronet wants to know how many beggars call. Have you got any rashers?" demanded the gallant officer, once more turning ferociously round upon the trembling landlord.

"Yes, sir—and beautiful fresh eggs," was the meek response. "Rashers and eggs, sir, for lunch?" he added, in a humble tone of inquiry.

"And kidneys, sirrah" thundered the Captain, with appalling sternness. "Robin, you like kidneys—don't you?"

"Chops," was the laconic answer.

"Well, chops, then, sirrah," exclaimed the Captain, bending the fiercest looks upon the landlord. "And now mark me! The clock has just struck one—and my man Robin has been following Miss Trelawney's carriage up into Piccadilly or somewhere—remained outside the house where she went and stayed for a couple of hours—waited till the carriage came to fetch her again—and then followed her back home. Now, sirrah, having done all this, my man Robin is naturally hungry—very hungry: and when Robin is hungry, it is a sign that I am hungry also—and therefore, the clock having just struck one, if the lunch is not up here by the moment it chimes the quarter past, I'll tear the house down and flay you alive—that's all!"

"Very good, sir," said the landlord, in his usual meek way: and he descended the stairs three at a time, bawling out to his better half below, who superintended the kitchen department, "Kidneys, chops, and rashers with eggs for Captain Tash!—rashers with eggs, chops, and kidneys for Captain Ta—a—sh!"

"I frightened him out of his skin, Robin—didn't I?" observed the gallant gentleman, with a horse laugh, the moment the door had closed behind the retreating landlord.

"Yes—but I don't see the use of it," returned Robin drily. "The man is a good man in his way. He gave us credit when we were hard up. You didn't bully him then. Bread and cheese was good enough for our dinner in those times—and you didn't mind waiting Snooks's convenience till it was got ready. Now you order three dishes for unch—and won't wait a minute. It isn't consistent."

"Consistent!" echoed the Captain, in a rage. "By jingo, I've a precious great mind to——"

But stopping short, he raised a tankard to his lips and sent about a pint of ale down his throat in less time than he could have counted five. Almost immediately afterwards a dirty slip-shod servant-girl entered the room, saying, "Please, sir, missus told me to come up and tell you as how there's no kinneys in the 'ouse—but there's sassengers, if you like 'em instead."

"No kidneys!" thundered the Captain. "Daggers and bayonets! if you don't go to the butcher's and get some directly, I'll eat *you!*"

The girl, becoming deadly pale even through a thick coating of grime upon her face, shrank back in horror as if she thought that the dreadful man would really carry his awful threats into execution and devour her then and there: but the next moment she burst into tears, which speedily traced several lines down her cheeks, as the rain does on dirty glass, and whimpered out an observation to the effect that "she couldn't make kinneys if so be there was none."

"No more she can," remarked Robin, as he still stood motionless as a statue behind the window-curtain.

"Not make them!" ejaculated the Captain. "Why, I tell you they can make anything in this wonderful metropolis of our's!—sugar out of sand—tea out of sloe-leaves—gin out of vitriol—coffee out of chicory—beef-sausages out of horse-flesh—rabbit-pies out of kittens—and biscuits out of Canada timber. Why the devil, then, shouldn't they make kidneys out of something? Eh, Robin?—eh, girl?—answer me *that*."

"Order the sausages and let her go," said Robin, curtly. "I like sausages."

"Then be it so—and five minutes to get all ready," exclaimed the Captain.

The girl rushed down stairs, ineffably relieved at having escaped being devoured by the modern ogre who had frightened her so terribly: and whilst the lunch was getting ready, the Captain strutted to and fro in the room with majestic self-importance, his man still retaining his post at the window.

"I dare say you think me severe at times, Robin—very severe towards these people of the *Green Dragon*," he remarked: "but Snooks is an idle fellow—and his wife and servant are as slow as himself. It does them good to stir them up a little now and then with a few words of gentle castigation or remonstrance. Besides, different circumstances demand different treatment. It was all very well to let Mr. Snooks dawdle about just as he chose when we couldn't pay our bills at his house: but now that I've got gold in my pocket, Robin,"—and the Captain hit himself a tremendous rap upon the upper part of his thigh as he spoke,—"I'll make everybody and everything in the place look alive, to serve me promptly—even to the cursed old sign of the green dragon itself that swings so crazily over the tavern door."

"If we don't mind what we're about, sir," said Robin, deferentially, "we shall become so obnoxious that the landlord will bid us leave his premises: and then how are we to watch Acacia Cottage?"

"The landlord eject us!" roared Tash, in astonishment. "What! eject *me*—*me*, Captain Rolando Tash! Robin, my dear fellow, don't hint at such a thing again, or you will grieve me sadly: for I shall begin to apprehend that your brain is somewhat affected. Eject *me*, indeed! Thunder and lightning! it would be a hard matter, I can assure you! Eject *me*—*me*, Captain Rolando Tash! Preposterous—absurd—ridiculous!"

And the gallant officer strutted and swaggered to and fro in the apartment, fuming and chafing as if he were filled with a rage which must boil over and vent itself upon some unfortunate wight, no matter how undeserving the victim might be. But happily the prompt appearance of a tray covered with dishes that sent forth an inviting odour, somewhat mollified the fury of Rolando Tash: and as the meek landlord shuffled about, arranging the table and making everything look as neat and comfortable as he could, the sternness of the Captain's countenance gradually

relaxed, until it was completely lost in a broad expansive smile.

"Snooks!" he exclaimed, dealing the landlord a tremendous slap upon the back: "you are not a bad fellow after all—and as I am getting up in the world, I shall continue to patronise your establishment, and none other."

At this announcement Mr. Snooks appeared particularly uneasy—and, fidgetting about with a knife and fork which he had just placed upon the table, he eyed the Captain askance as if to ascertain the precise humour he was in.

"I beg your pardon, sir—I'm very sorry—very sorry indeed, sir," he stammered forth; "but I really—I mean to say that however gratified and honoured I may be—yet——"

"Yet what?" inquired the Captain with awful calmness.

"Well, sir, I had better come to an explanation with you at once," said the landlord, plucking up a spirit and looking the gallant officer in the face, though prudently taking his stand in such a manner that the table was between them, while he (Mr. Snooks) was nearest the door. "The fact is, sir," he continued, "my missus is a very nervous woman—and my servant-girl is subject to hysterics—and I myself am not over strong in the nerves—and as of course a gentleman like you makes a good deal of noise—I mean to say, that you expect things to be done off-hand——"

"Well, sirrah—proceed," observed the Captain, still with that profound and awe-inspiring calmness which precedes the terrific outburst of the storm.

"And so I was thinking, sir," continued the landlord, not quite comprehending the nature of this lull, and flattering himself that the spirit which he now displayed was actually and positively producing a strong effect upon the Captain,—"I was thinking, sir, that if it was convenient for yourself and Mr. Robin to give me up the rooms in the

course of the afternoon and remove to some other tavern, I should esteem it as a favour—and my missus would be particularly obliged."

"Is that all?" asked the Captain.

"Well, sir, I don't know that I've anything more to say," responded Mr. Snooks: "unless it is that I mean no offence and hope we shall part good friends."

"Then, by the living jingo, you infernal scoundrel, I'll punish you for this!" thundered the Captain: and darting round the table, he caught the landlord by the collar of his coat just as the affrighted wretch was precipitating himself towards the stairs. "Come along, sirrah—come along—and if you make a noise, I'll flay you alive! There, sir—up into that corner—now stand on your head—and, by all the daggers and bayonets in the universe! you shall remain in that posture while I and Robin eat our luncheons."

And suiting the action to the word, the Captain lifted up the unfortunate Mr. Snooks as easily as if he were a child—turned him completely over with his feet up in the air—and then deposited him in that ignominious and painful position in the corner.

As for Robin, he just glanced at what was going on, and then fixed his looks again as intently as ever upon the front of Acacia Cottage, apparently considering his duties in that quarter to be of more consequence than the pranks of his master.

The landlord, who was rapidly growing purple in the face, begged and besought the Captain to forgive him: and after some little parley, during which the wretched Mr. Snooks acknowledged himself to be an insolent rascal and promised never to offend again, the gallant officer vouchsafed to temper his justice with mercy. The result was that the landlord, having made all possible submission, was allowed to resume his natural posture once more; and, slinking from the room, he hastened down stairs to vent his wrath upon his better half at whose instigation he had dared to give his formidable guest the notice to quit.

"Now, Robin," exclaimed the Captain, so soon as the landlord had retired, "let us discuss our luncheon. Here are chops," he observed, lifting one of the meat-covers and flinging it across the room; "here are rashers and eggs," he continued tossing the second meat-cover into another corner; —"and here are sausages," he added, sending the third cover spinning through the open window into the street.

Robin started—looked at his master for an instant—and then turned his eyes upon Acacia Cottage again, without uttering a word.

"Come and have your lunch, I say," cried the Captain.

"You know that I always keep watch while you get your meals," said Robin: "and then you take your turn for a few minutes while I get mine. There's something going on opposite."

"What?" demanded the Captain, as he began a desperate assault upon the viands.

"The servants have been doing out the drawing-room with great care," replied Robin.

"Well, and so they ought since the furniture's good," remarked Tash. "Thunder and lightning! if I had such a house as that, I'd have a whole regiment to polish the chairs and tables every morning. But what else do you observe?"

"Miss Trelawney has just entered the drawing-room—and she is splendidly dressed," answered Robin. "Now she's regarding herself in the mirror——"

"And well she may," exclaimed the Captain: "for she is the sweetest, loveliest woman I ever saw in all my life. Handsome people are naturally fond of looking at themselves in the glass, Robin. I am for one:"—and with this remark, the gallant officer raised a tankard to his lips and drained it at a draught.

"Miss Trelawney has been contemplating herself for more than a minute in that glass," said Robin. "She must be very conceited and vain. Ah! she little thinks that anybody is watching her, and how plain I can see into her drawing-room. Now she studies some attitude or look in front of the glass——"

"Depend upon it there's a visitor expected, Robin," observed the Captain. "But I will enter all these particulars in my memorandum-book presently. Let me see, I am to call on the Earl of Curzon this evening at ten—and on Sir Douglas Huntingdon at eleven. Ah! it was a very odd thing that when you went to the baronet's on Tuesday evening, he should give you just the same instructions that the Earl had given me on the Monday—I mean, to watch all Miss Trelawney's movements as we are doing. I suppose there's a regular dead set made at her by the gay young sparks of the West End. Curzon on Monday—Huntingdon on Tuesday—and then that cowardly scoundrel Malpas last night at Lady Wenlock's—— How I hate that Malpas, Robin!"

"I don't like him neither," observed the man. "Done your lunch?" he inquired, as his master rose and gave the bell a terrific pull.

"Not quite, Robin," answered the Captain, as he resumed his seat. "I merely want another flagon of ale—and some more chops, eggs, and sausages for you—seeing that I have swilled and devoured everything the landlord put upon the table. Now, Mr. Snooks," he exclaimed as this individual made his trembling and timid appearance at the door, "I am not going to scold you—on the contrary, I am well pleased with you, your *missus* as you call her, and your culinary arrangements below. The chops, the rashers, and the sausages were all so good that I have honoured them with the fullest discussion: and therefore for the behoof of my worthy attendant——"

Here Robin gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise, exclaiming, "The Prince Regent's private carriage has just stopped at Miss Trelawney's door!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THURSDAY: OR, THE FOURTH SUITOR.

ROBIN was right: it was indeed the private carriage of the Prince Regent which had just stopped at the door of Acacia Cottage. His Royal Highness descended, and was immediately ushered up into the drawing-room, where Venetia Trelawney, in all the splendour and glory of her charms, rose from the sofa to receive him.

Although the Prince was so polished in manners, and Venetia was so lady-like, yet neither one could

restrain or conceal the look of curiosity which they flung upon each other as they thus met. His Royal Highness beheld Miss Trelawney for the first time—and he was dazzled and amazed by her exceeding loveliness, which transcended even the vivid descriptions that had been given of it on the occasion of the banquet at the Marquis of Leveson's house. On the other hand, although Venetia had seen the Prince two or three times at a distance when he was riding in the park, she had never till now beheld him close enough to decide how far he resembled his published portraits. We cannot say that she was not somewhat disappointed, for portraits are nearly always flatterers: but she had the tact to conceal the impression which the princely appearance thus made upon her.

Having besought his Royal Highness to be seated, Miss Trelawney remained standing in pursuance of the established etiquette: but the Prince, with that, off-hand politeness for which he was celebrated, observed with a smile that he could not think of taking a chair until she herself was seated. She accordingly placed herself upon the sofa, while the Regent took an arm-chair at a short distance.

"It would be telling an untruth, Miss Trelawney," said His Royal Highness, at once opening the conversation, "and withholding a compliment which you so pre-eminently merit, were I to allege that it is not a sentiment of curiosity that has induced me to pay you the homage of a call. In plain terms, I had received such exciting accounts of your incomparable beauty, that I was most anxious to have the pleasure of forming the acquaintance of the goddess who graces the metropolis with her presence."

"I had already been assured that your Royal Highness was proficient in the art of flattery," replied Venetia, with a blush and a half-smile: "but I did not anticipate the honour of a personal proof of that accomplishment."

"Since you style it an accomplishment, Miss Trelawney," returned the Prince, "you cannot of course be offended by the mode in which I have addressed you. A goddess must consent to receive the adoration which her beauty inspires."

"Women are such vain and frivolous creatures," rejoined Miss Trelawney,—"or at least they have the reputation of being so,—that were I the first to whom your Royal Highness had ever addressed such honied language, I might be immensely flattered by it. But inasmuch as I am well aware that every beauty about the English court has been honoured with the same approval—perhaps, too, in precisely the same words——"

"Miss Trelawney, you are too severe upon me," interrupted the Prince. "I see that you possess a wit equal to your loveliness——"

"And you, sir, a faculty of heaping compliment upon compliment," responded Venetia, with a smile that displayed her brilliant teeth.

"In praising you, Miss Trelawney," said the Prince, fixing upon her a look of deep meaning, "I only gave an honest expression to my thoughts. Yes—you are so far right—I am indeed an admirer of female beauty. I worship—I adore it. But of all the charms that ever received praises from my lips, your's are indescribably beyond all parallel. We must have you at Court, Miss Trelawney; and if you will permit me to become the means of presenting you to the most distinguished ladies who rule the world of fashion, I shall be delighted to have that honour."

"I am at a loss to conceive how I could so suddenly have won your Royal Highness's favour," observed Venetia, her eyes sparkling with a triumph which it was impossible altogether to subdue: "I—a humble, obscure individual——"

"A lady invested with such peerless charms is neither humble nor obscure," said the Prince Regent, emphatically. "And, moreover, if it were necessary to gild the name of Trelawney by the adventitious aid of a title, have I not the power to do that also?"

"Your Royal Highness is making me the object of an experiment," said Venetia, with a flush upon her cheeks—but not a flush of anger: for a subdued joy shone in her beauteous eyes, and smiles beamed upon her heavenly countenance. "You are endeavouring, sir, to ascertain the extent to which a woman's credulity may reach, through the medium of her vanity: and although I do not profess to be more strongly-minded than the generality of my sex, yet I have the sense to avoid rendering myself contemptible in your eyes."

"Upon my soul, you misinterpret my meaning—you do me wrong, Miss Trelawney!" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "I am serious—and what is more, I am *sincere* in all I say: and if you will permit me at once to consider myself upon a footing of friendship with you, I shall be enabled to speak with less reserve."

"I cannot forget, sir," replied Venetia, "that you are the representative of the Sovereign, and that I, as a dutiful subject, am bound to listen deferentially to all that your Royal Highness may choose to address to me. But I beseech you, sir, not to pay me so ill a compliment—after honouring me with so many flattering ones—as to suppose that I am one of those vain, frivolous, silly creatures whose character is taken as the general type of the sex."

"It is precisely because I *do* regard you as possessing a superior mind, that I crave leave to give utterance to my thoughts without reserve or circumlocution. Grant me this permission, Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the Prince, "and you will at once place me at my ease."

"I am of course prepared to listen to whatsoever your Royal Highness may have to say to me," returned Venetia.

"But shall I incur the chance of offending you?" inquired the Prince.

"Your own excellent notions of the courtesy due to a lady must surely render such a fear on your part, sir, quite unnecessary," observed Miss Trelawney.

"But suppose that I threw myself at your feet, and declared that I loved you?" said the Prince, eagerly and anxiously watching the effect of his words.

"I should consider that you were carrying your present jocular humour to a foolish extreme," answered Venetia, laughing.

"But if it were really true, Miss Trelawney—if it were with positive sincerity that I could thus sink on my knees in your presence and offer you the homage of my heart,—what treatment might I anticipate at your hands?" demanded the Prince, with fervid tone and impassioned looks.

"I know not how to respond to such strange

questions," replied Venetia, averting her blushing, glowing countenance, while the slow but deep heaving of her superbly-developed bust evinced the agitation which prevailed within that bosom of incomparable grandeur.

"Ah! dear lady," exclaimed the Prince, drawing his chair closer towards her, "you will not be cruel towards me—I am certain you will not! Were I a humble individual, I should not have dared thus to address you so hastily—so precipitately—within the first few minutes of our acquaintance. But you are well aware that I am an exceptional being—not having the leisure for all those protracted candidatures and that lengthened courtship, so to speak, which under other circumstances would be a duty so cheerfully performed. Now, answer me—and answer me candidly, Venetia: are your affections already engaged?—do you love some happy and enviable young man?—is your heart bestowed upon one whose bride you hope to be?"

"I have had many suitors, sir," was the soft and murmuring reply, as the richly-fringed lids drooped lower upon the melting blue orbs which they now more than half concealed, while the magnificent amplitude of the lady's bosom seemed to swell as if each glowing globe must burst from the corset that imprisoned them.

"You have had many suitors?" echoed the Prince, advancing his chair still nearer to the lovely woman, and speaking in the subdued but tremulous voice of profound passion: "but you do not tell me that any one of them has succeeded in obtaining an avowal from your lips? Then may I not hope—may I not fancy that your heart is indeed disengaged, Venetia—dear Venetia——"

"I have never loved, sir," she observed, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"Can you love me?—will you love me?" asked the Prince, taking her hand, to withdraw which only a slight attempt was made—and then, feeling that he retained it in his own, she abandoned it to his clasp. "You are aware, Venetia," he continued in that deep voice of masculine harmony which gave such power to his insidious language, "that I dare not speak to you of marriage. But the mistress of a Prince—a Prince Regent, who will some day be a King—is far above the wife of the proudest peer in Christendom. You know that I am speaking the truth, Venetia," he said, his tones becoming more melting—the pressure of his hand more fervid; "and you are too sensible not to be aware that the lady on whom I bestow my love will enjoy all honour, distinction, and respect in the highest circles of fashion. Yes, Venetia—consent to be mine—mine so far as love can render you mine—and I promise you eternal fidelity. I have been deemed fickle and inconstant: but I am not so in reality. The truth is that hitherto where beauty has charmed me at first, vanity and shallow-mindedness have disgusted me afterwards. I have been dazzled by the charms of many women: but few have possessed those mental qualities which fix the impression and render indelible the effect originally produced by the graces of the person. With you it is different. Not only are you as lovely as perfect loveliness can make you,—not only do your external charms excel aught in the form of female beauty that ever met my eyes before,—but you are endowed with those intellectual attractions that rivet the affection which your charms inspire. Your conversation must ever please—your opinions upon all topics must be valuable—and your temper cannot fail to be endearing, as your wit is calculated to sustain and invigorate the healthy cheerfulness of the soul. You see that I understand your character and your disposition well, Venetia: and if you will permit me to enjoy the disposal of your happiness, depend upon it that I shall ever consult your welfare to the extent of my abilities. Answer me, then, Venetia—answer me, dear girl—and tell me whether you will consent to be mine upon these terms?"

While the Prince Regent was thus speaking, the colour went and came upon Venetia's damask countenance: but every time the warm blood rushed back to those cheeks so soft and yet so firm, they glowed with a deepening dye. And the superb bosom rose and sank with quicker heavings—while her rich red lips remained apart, as if breathing the mute sweets to which her tongue refused verbal utterance: so that nothing could exceed the charm of this soft languor and subdued voluptuousness of beauty.

"Venetia, did you hear me?—will you be mine?" asked the Prince, gently moving from the chair to the sofa, on which he placed himself by her side, still retaining her soft plump hand in his own—that hand which trembled as he pressed it!

"But if I were to answer you in the affirmative," she said, in a soft billing tone, as she hung down her head so as to conceal her countenance from the looks which she *felt* as it were to be fixed upon her with all the ardour of passion,—"would you not think the worse of me for being so hasty—so precipitate ——"

"Not more than you must think so of me," returned the Prince, already foreseeing that his triumph was assured: and he gently passed his left arm round her waist, while his right hand still retained her own. "Tell me, then, dear Venetia—keep me not in suspense——will you be mine?"

"I will," she answered, in a voice that was not louder than the whispering zephyr: "I will be thine—thine!"

"Dearest, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, now seizing her as it were with all the devouring avidity of passion and straining her in his arms.

He pressed his lips to her's and drank in the fragrance of her breath. Never, Oh! never to him, experienced in all sensuous delights though he were, had woman's lips appeared so sweet—so ripe—so luscious, with their dewy moisture! Then he imprinted a thousand kisses upon her cheeks and her forehead—and then his caresses recurred to those delicious lips again! Thence they wandered to the sloping shoulders, so white—so plump—so warm; and her luxuriant hair felt soft as velvet against his cheek. His passion became almost ungovernable: it appeared a dream—a veritable dream that he could so soon have reached the threshold of paradise,—he who had entered that room but an hour previously as a stranger, save by name, to its charming inmate! But it was assuredly no dream as his lips wandered kissingly from that luscious mouth to those damask, glowing cheeks,—from those cheeks where the blood mantled hotly, to the shoulders whose polished surface was catching the crimson tinge,—and thence back

again to the mouth where the choicest of all earthly sweets were to be culled.

But, maddened with desire, the Prince pressed the glowing bosom that swelled yet more exuberantly to the contact of his daring hand: yet when he sought to invade its treasures more boldly and completely still, and when he essayed to profit by the yielding weakness and melting tenderness of the agitated, trembling, almost helpless Venetia,—when, in fine, he endeavoured to overcome the last obstacles that lay between himself and complete happiness,—he was suddenly disappointed and baffled by the force with which she started and disengaged herself from his arms.

Then retreating to the end of the sofa, and half turning her back towards him, Venetia arranged her hair and disordered dress in profound silence: but the rapid heavings of her bosom showed how deeply she was agitated.

"Are you angry with me, beloved Venetia?" inquired the Prince, in a low and tender voice.

"Oh! no—no," she exclaimed, suddenly turning towards him: then, fixing her beauteous blue eyes upon his countenance, and taking his hand of her own accord, she said, "In becoming your's, I make a certain sacrifice—and before I surrender myself entirely up to you, I must enter into a few words of explanation for my own sake. For it cannot do otherwise than seem strange that I should accept your overtures all in a moment and consent without reflection to become your mistress. Were I to tell you that the instant you entered this house, you inspired me with a love which proved stronger than myself, you would not believe me. No—you could not and you ought not to put faith in such a tale, were I weak or deceptive enough to tell it. Then how can you account for the readiness with which I have entered into this compact with you? You must either believe me to be grandly ambitious, or a profligate wanton. But as there is a heaven above us, I am not the latter. My lips were virgin of man's kisses until you pressed them just now: and never until this hour did the blush of shame glow upon my cheeks. It is, then, that I am ambitious—that, as you yourself have expressed it, I would sooner be the mistress of a Prince who is almost a King, than the wife of the proudest peer in Great Britain. Such is the feeling—such the sentiment which has inspired me upon the present occasion. Give me a lofty position, sir—and I will be to you the most faithful, the most affectionate, the most devoted of women. But I require a title to embellish my name—riches to support that title—and all the distinction which can possibly be paid to your acknowledged mistress. Pardon me for mentioning a name which may haply recall unpleasant recollections to your mind—but Mrs. Fitzherbert was your acknowledged mistress, and she was surrounded by veneration, respect, and honour. It is to such a position that I wish to be elevated. Consent to my demands, and I am your's—only your's—unalterably your's: refuse me, or even hesitate to comply—and our connexion ends as it began—within the hour that is now passing!"

"Venetia," answered the Prince, who had ample leisure during this long and seriously-delivered speech to reflect upon all the statements it made and the stipulations it contained,—"I will deal as frankly with you as you have done with me. You spoke of the position of Mrs. Fitzherbert—and you expressed a desire to assume a similar one. But remember that at the time Mrs. Fitzherbert was living openly with me at Carlton House, I was as yet unmarried; and a certain gloss was thrown over our connexion by the rumour that we were privately united in the bonds of matrimony. Circumstances are now altered. I am married—and no such shadow of an apology could be found for any new connexion which I may form. Moreover, although separated from my wife—and having no reason to respect, much less love that miserable woman,"—and the Prince spoke with a virulent acerbity of manner,—"yet I dare not so far outrage all decency as to live openly once more with a mistress at Carlton House. Were you married, Venetia, it would be a different thing. I could appoint your husband to an office in my household; and by virtue of that office he would have his suite of apartments at Carlton Palace, where you might dwell with him, without exciting the outcry of scandal. At all events, under such circumstances public opinion could be easily defied. But you are unmarried——"

"Should you love me the less if I were married?" asked Venetia, hastily: and she gazed upon him with tender earnestness.

"Love you the less, dearest!" exclaimed the Prince. "No—that were impossible!"—and he threw his arms about her neck.

"Let us converse seriously," she said, gently disengaging herself from his embrace. "Would you like me to be married?"

"Yes—if the husband were complaisant and closed his eyes upon our amours," returned the Prince. "But such husbands are not always to be found—at least not in a hurry. You cannot pick and choose them very easily."

"I will be married in less than a week, sir," exclaimed Miss Trelawney: "and to such a husband as you have described."

"What! you have already one in reserve, my darling?" cried the Prince Regent, with a smile. "But are you serious, Venetia?"

"Never was I more so," she answered. "If you give your consent to the arrangement, I promise you to carry it into effect. And for more reasons than one should I rejoice at it," she continued in a tone of deep deliberation and pensiveness: "for it would save my reputation—it would spare my relatives a pang, if they ever learnt——But enough of that!" she cried, suddenly checking herself and dashing away a tear that had started forth upon her long lashes. "Do you, I ask, consent to the arrangement that has been suggested?"

"I prefer it to any other," responded the Prince: "the more so, because as you stipulated for a title of nobility, I can devise or find out some feasible ground for conferring a peerage upon the husband whom you may choose—whereas a title conferred upon yourself, as a single woman, would at once stamp you as my mistress and provoke a murmur throughout the country. Not that I care much for the opinion or the hostility of the people: the cannon, thank God! will always put down discontent—and the British Government has never yet been at a loss for faithful generals who would as soon mow down a mob as receive their pension for doing it. I say, then, my charming Venetia, that I approve of your arrangement—and thus do I again ratify our bar-

gain," he added, seizing her in his arms and once more gluing his lips to her luscious mouth.

She embraced him with reciprocal fervour, lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses and breathing sweet words in his ear. But when he again sought to crown his happiness, she gently repulsed him,—with mingled smiles, however, and blushes.

"Ah! Venetia, you are cruel—too cruel thus to tantalize me!" murmured the Prince. "When will you be mine? Must I be kept in suspense until after the marriage which you are about to accomplish?—or may I hope that this evening—or to-morrow evening——"

"To-morrow evening we will meet," whispered Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance. "But it cannot be here: my reputation must not be damaged—perhaps wrecked—previously to this marriage which is to save it——"

"Then you will meet me elsewhere, my love?" said the enraptured Prince, seizing her hand and conveying it to his lips.

"Wherever you may choose to appoint," was the murmuring reply. "I will manage to be there without exciting suspicion at home. But I cannot use my own carriage for the purpose——"

"Mine shall be waiting for you at any hour and place you may name," said the Prince.

"To-morrow evening—at nine o'clock—and at Hyde Park corner," answered Venetia. "I shall be muffled up in cloak and veil——"

"And the carriage shall bring you to the private entrance of Carlton House," added the Prince. "Till then, my adored Venetia, farewell!"

Another fervid embrace—and they separated.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DELICATE COMPACT.

It was not until the Prince Regent was some distance from Acacia Cottage, that he recollected his delicate compact with the Marquis of Leveson. He had set out to visit Miss Trelawney with the firm intention of adhering to that compact: he had even entered her presence in the same mood—for his mind was still occupied mainly with the image of the lady in the gossamer dress. But the moment he stood in Venetia's presence, that image melted from his memory as an effigy of snow would dissolve beneath the rays of a scorching sun. Much as he had heard in praise of Miss Trelawney's beauty, he was taken by surprise with the mingled grandeur, witchery, and splendour of that loveliness which so far exceeded all the ideas he had pictured to himself upon the subject.

He went, therefore, in order to intrigue and to conquer for the behoof of the Marquis of Leveson: but, as the reader has seen, his tactics were all in a moment turned into another channel—and he both intrigued and conquered for himself. The beauty of Venetia instantaneously inspired him with a sentiment which obliterated the image of the gossamer lady as totally for the time being as if it had never had a seat in his soul: he heard Venetia speak—and the music of her voice touched chords in his heart that had not thus vibrated for years before. The richness of her form was precisely that which best suited the taste of the Prince: her auburn hair, crowning her head as with a glory, denoted the fervid temperament that he so much loved to meet in woman. Then the conversation of Venetia had delighted him: her readiness at repartee, without the faintest flippancy—her well chosen language—her logical mode of expressing her thoughts—and her skill in baffling the assaults of flattery until she chose gradually to yield, and ultimately to surrender to the overtures made her,—all this had invested the interview with a peculiar charm the influence of which sank deep into his mind.

Throughout that interview, therefore, he had never once thought of the lady in the gossamer dress—never once thought, either, of his delicate compact with the Marquis of Leveson. When the interview was over, and all was settled between himself and Venetia in a manner that filled his soul with raptures, he had returned to his carriage to give way to the delicious reflections and still more elysian hopes that resulted from his visit. But as the carriage was rattling along Piccadilly and drawing near the corner of Albemarle Street, the Prince Regent suddenly recollected his bargain with the Marquis of Leveson.

The thought troubled him sorely. He had undertaken to abandon to the Marquis all his chances of success with Venetia Trelawney: he had solemnly and sacredly pledged himself to communicate to his lordship everything that passed between himself and that lady. What was he to do?—how was he to act? To resign his claim to Venetia was now almost the same as to ask him to resign his claim to the British throne. He was mad with love—that is to say, the sensuous passion which was all he ever knew in the guise of that sentiment. The lady in the gossamer dress might be hanged, drawn, and quartered now, for anything he cared: he would not give one fig while Venetia's image was yet uppermost in his mind and the pressure of her lips was still felt as it were upon his own,—no, he would not give one fig for all the gossamer ladies in the world

But how was he to manage with the Marquis of Leveson? It would be impossible to keep his approaching connexion with Venetia Trelawney altogether secret from that nobleman: and he dared not risk a quarrel with one who was so deeply in his confidence, especially with regard to the atrocious conspiracy that was in progress respecting the Princess of Wales. The best thing he could do under the circumstances—in fact, the only thing—was to call at once upon the Marquis, tell him all, and pursuade him to grant a release in respect to the compact so hurriedly and rashly made on the preceding Monday night.

Pulling the check-string, his Royal Highness commanded the coachman to drive to Lord Leveson's in Albemarle Street; and in a few minutes he descended at that noble's palatial dwelling. The Marquis was at home; and the instant the Prince Regent was announced, his lordship of course attributed the visit to an honourable intention on the part of his Royal Highness of fulfilling the bargain made relative to Venetia.

The moment the footman had retired after ushering the Prince to the drawing-room where the Marquis of Leveson received his royal visitor, the latter exclaimed, "My dear friend, a thought struck me as I was coming along—and to that thought must I first give utterance before we speak upon any other subject."

"I am all attention," said the Marquis. "Pray proceed, sir."

"You know that the death of the Duke of Bockport has left a vacancy in the Order of the Garter," continued the Prince: "and I was thinking that perhaps you would like to have it."

"My dear Prince," exclaimed the sexagenarian nobleman, bounding from his seat and snatching hold of the Regent's hand, "this is indeed kind—most kind on your part! It is the height of my ambition—save and excepting the dukedom which you have promised me whenever our views relative to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales shall have been carried out. But in the meantime the Garter—yes, the Garter is the very thing!" ejaculated the old nobleman, as pleased at the prospect of possessing the trumpery bauble as a child on being promised a new toy.

"Well, my dear Leveson," said the Prince, inwardly chuckling at the triumphant success of his stratagem to propitiate the Marquis beforehand, "you shall have the Garter—that is a bargain. I will speak to Ministers about it to-morrow. You have always voted with them—you have been a staunch friend to their policy—and no voice has been raised louder or oftener than your's in the Upper House, in favour of Church and State. They cannot therefore quarrel with the choice I have made for the vacant Garter. If they do, I'll find a pretext to dismiss them all at once—damn them, I will!" ejaculated the Prince Regent, with the emphasis which he was wont to bestow upon an oath.

"Again do I thank you most sincerely, sir," rejoined the Marquis of Leveson: then, resuming his seat, he said, "And now what about our charming Venetia? It is your day for commencing the siege—and I suppose your Royal Highness has been with the mysterious angel?"

"I had not quite finished my observations relative to the affair of the Garter—or I should say, relative to something connected therewith," continued the Prince, dexterously evading an immediate reply to Lord Leveson's query respecting Venetia. "I was about to remark that inasmuch as the Garter is a boon which, when bestowed upon you, will excite the envy and jealousy of all other claimants, I shall have to encounter no small degree of odium with those persons. I therefore think that, in doing all this for you, Leveson, I have a right to solicit a favour in return. In fact, you can do me a service—a great service—if you will."

"Then most assuredly I shall have infinite pleasure in doing it," was the prompt reply of the Marquis of Leveson. "Name it, sir—name it——"

"But will you faithfully promise?" demanded the Prince.

"Faithfully—solemnly," returned the nobleman, perfectly convinced in his own mind that his royal friend was about to stipulate for a sum of money in recompense for the bestowal of the vacant Garter.

"Well—we will talk more on the subject presently," said the Prince Regent. "Let us now speak of Miss Trelawney."

"Aye—let us speak as soon as you like, sir, of Miss Trelawney," cried the Marquis, rubbing his hands with a sort of nervous glee: for he entertained no doubt but that the Prince had succeeded in making a conquest in that quarter—a conquest by which he himself hoped to profit, according to agreement.

"I have just come from Acacia Cottage," resumed the Prince, "where I passed an hour. Venetia is certainly very beautiful—very beautiful. Her charms have not been exaggerated. In fact, it would be impossible to exaggerate them ——"

"Ahem!" said the Marquis, beginning to sit somewhat uneasily on his chair. "Your Royal Highness appears to have been a trifle smitten?"

"No man can gaze upon Venetia Trelawney with utter impunity, Leveson," returned the Regent. "We had a long conversation together, of course: and I must candidly confess that I succeeded, after some trouble, in inducing her to listen to my proposals. The cunning puss! she has her little ambition ——"

"Aye—and you pandered to it, sir?" exclaimed the Marquis, nervously and anxiously. "She could not have had a better tactician to deal with. But pray tell me all!"

"I will—honourably and faithfully, according to promise," said the Prince.

"I knew you would, sir—I knew you would!" exclaimed the nobleman, rubbing his hands with a revival of cheering hope as he beheld this apparently straightforward disposition on the part of the Prince to realize his portion of the compact.

"Well," said his Royal Highness, "after a great deal of conversation we came to an understanding—and Venetia assented to my overtures. In plain terms, she agreed to become my mistress."

"Capital!—excellent!" cried Leveson, bounding upon his chair, and grinning like an ancient goat. "Well, sir, what next? I am on the tenter-hooks of expectation. Have you made some appointment with her?"

"I have. To-morrow evening, at nine o'clock," continued the Prince, "I am to send a plain carriage to Hyde Park corner, where she will be muffled up in veil and cloak ——"

"And then you will order your coachman to bring her to my house—eh, sir?" cried the Marquis. "Is that your plan—that your object?" he demanded, with all the petulance of acute suspense.

"To be sure, if you wish it," returned the Prince: then, in a hurried manner, he observed, "But by the bye, I forgot to name the little favour I require at your hands, in reward for the vacant Garter, the investiture of which shall take place early next week."

"Oh! name the service you require, sir," exclaimed the Marquis: "I am all anxiety to continue the discourse relative to my charming Venetia—the angel who shall and must be mine after all ——"

"It is precisely with reference to Venetia that I propose to ask you a favour," said the Regent, taking a pinch of his own artistically confectioned mixture from a gold snuff-box set with brilliants.

"Your Royal Highness surely does not mean to fly from your bargain?" exclaimed Leveson, contemplating the Regent with all the agonies of a torturing suspense.

"Have I conducted myself like a man who intends basely and dishonourably to violate his engagement?" demanded the Prince. "I have described to you with exactitude all that took place between Miss Venetia Trelawney and myself—

have told you that she consented to become my mistress—and I have put you in possession of the arrangements for the meeting of to-morrow night. Thus far I have fulfilled my compact. But you must permit me to add that you, Leveson, never can hope to triumph over Venetia by means of stratagem or artifice: she will prove far too cunning for you—and as for violence and outrage, that of course is out of the question. You would not dare attempt such a proceeding, even if you were strong as Hercules and she weak as a lamb. Now, then, my dear Leveson, seeing that you have not the ghost of a chance in that quarter, I ask you to release me from my compact with you—the only boon that I solicit in return for the vacant Garter——"

"Then do you abandon all farther designs upon the lady in the gossamer dress?" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, not looking over well pleased at the proposal, and yet scarcely seeing how to refuse it, especially as the Garter itself might haply be at stake: for he knew what a slippery customer he had to deal with.

"I most assuredly abandon all farther views in that quarter, my dear Leveson," answered the Prince; "and, by the bye, I think that if you succeed in discovering the gossamer lady, you may very well manage to console yourself with her for the loss of Venetia. Next to Miss Trelawney, she is decidedly the most splendid creature I ever encountered."

"Your Royal Highness is certainly a good judge," remarked Leveson, with the least accent of bitterness and sarcasm in his tone. "But if you will send me in the course of the afternoon a letter promising the Order of the Garter, in all due form and with your royal seal, I have no farther hesitation in saying that I release you from the compact relative to Venetia Trelawney."

"It shall be done, Leveson," replied the Prince.

"And your Royal Highness abandons all farther design upon the gossamer lady?" continued the Marquis.

"Most assuredly," was the ready response. "Ferret her out—make her your own—she is worthy of all the trouble or expense you may bestow upon the search after her. But perhaps you have already obtained a clue——"

"No, sir—not at present. I have, however, an active agent at work—and he will not let the grass grow under his feet. Neither is he the man to be baffled or disheartened," added the noble lord, emphatically.

"But when you *do* succeed in this search, Leveson," observed the Prince of Wales, "you will let me know what could be the meaning of all that mystery on Monday night, and what sort of a document it really was that I signed so rashly?"

"Whatever information I may succeed in obtaining upon those points, sir," returned Leveson, "shall be duly imparted to your Royal Highness. And now, sir, you will permit me to order up luncheon."

"No, my dear friend," interrupted the Prince, rising. "I must return to Carlton House. The Minister is to be with me at five punctually. There are numerous papers to sign—amongst them several death-warrants——By the bye, I could not help laughing at a paragraph which has recently gone the round of all the newspapers, and which shows how the wretched lickspittles of English journalists endeavour to prove their servile devotion to the Court. It is all pleasant enough to have the gentlemen of the press, as they call themselves, thus licking one's feet: but I cannot the less despise and contemn them for their miserable grovelling character and disgustingly sycophantic dispositions."

"But what is this paragraph to which your Royal Highness alludes?" inquired the Marquis.

"It was one which stated, in the most nauseating terms of flattery, that I experienced a horror and aversion at signing death-warrants," said the Prince. "Now the fact is, I don't think the laws are half severe enough. The lower orders are dreadfully discontented—a parcel of seditious scoundrels that were born to be the slaves of us princes and nobles! How I detest them, the unwashed ruffians!—and so far from having any remorse at signing death-warrants, I should like to see more of the wretches tucked up."

"Yes—I think that the severest examples are required, sir," observed the Marquis of Leveson. "The lower orders are beginning to think for themselves——"

"And they have no business to do so," exclaimed the Prince Regent, stamping his foot upon the carpet. "But I tell you what, Leveson—if there's any more sedition in the country, the government spies and agents shall urge on the mobs to violence—and then we'll have a good massacre. A wholesale massacre will strike terror into the hearts of the people. Why, what with the writings of Tom Paine and other scoundrels of the revolutionary class, the lower orders are actually becoming quite opinionated. Enlightened, by God! I'll enlighten them shortly, if they don't mind: but it shall be with the gleam of bayonets, the flash of sabres, and the blaze of artillery."

"Yes, sir—I agree with you," said the Marquis of Leveson, as coolly and deliberately as if he were discussing the most ordinary topic of the day. "Ministers will be much to blame if they don't get up a massacre shortly. But, by the bye," exclaimed the nobleman, as the thought struck him, "is not this a provoking affair about young Mary Owen? I sent you a note last evening with the particulars——"

"Well, it is somewhat annoying," said the Prince: "but it can't be helped. She will no doubt return home again to her mother in a day or two. At all events, as she promises in her note that she will not betray her parent or her sisters, I think that she is to be relied upon in that respect. She loves them too well to do them an injury. But even if she were to reveal what she knows to any stranger into whose hands she may fall, she would not be believed: or if believed, no one would dare to give publicity to such circumstances. Thank God! we've a good law of libel and the most complaisant, willing, accommodating juries in this country. Besides, there's such a thing as suspending the Habeas Corpus Act and sending all ruffianly libellers and scandal-mongers out of the land, or else locking them up secure in gaol. Everything considered, therefore, I see nothing to apprehend and little to fret about in Mary Owen's conduct. Indeed being so timorous and full of nice scruples, it is much better that she should have withdrawn from an affair which she would only have compromised by her namby-pamby nonsense and maudlin sen-

timentalism. I always thought she was different from her three sisters——"

"Yes," observed the Marquis. "As you are well aware I had signalled her out as one worthy the trouble of a conquest: but if ever I ventured too far in my caresses, she invariably repulsed and baffled me. But I do not think it was so with her three sisters?" added the nobleman as he glanced significantly at the Prince.

"I can answer for Agatha, that she was no prude," returned his Royal Highness, with a smile of similar meaning. "She surrendered herself without much reluctance to my arms: and I believe that my two brothers experienced no more difficulty in overcoming the scruples of Emma and Julia. It is fortunate enough that neither of the three has proved in the family way——"

"I would not have had it happen for the world," exclaimed the Marquis. "Mrs. Owen positively and expressly stipulated all along that while her daughters were being inured to the delicate and exquisite refinements of demoralization, their virtue should be respected."

"I am aware of her stipulations on that point," said the Prince. "But she must have been mad to suppose that all four of her daughters could enter the lion's den and come out unscathed, not one of them to receive a single scratch! However, it is astonishing how blind and credulous in some respects are even the most astute, cunning, and crafty of women."

"But Mrs. Owen, though a thorough woman of the world, knows little of the depths and intricacies of the human heart," observed Lord Leveson.

"That is perfectly true," exclaimed the Prince; "and she no doubt hugs the belief that her three eldest daughters are as pure and chaste, so far as what is called their virtue is concerned, as on the day of their birth."

"No doubt of it," replied the Marquis.

"I believe Mrs. Owen was never married?" said the Prince, inquiringly.

"Never," responded Lord Leveson. "But are you not acquainted with her early history, and that of her sisters?"

"Not entirely, I think," answered the Regent. "You have often been going to tell me: but something has always occurred to interrupt the narrative, even when you commenced it."

"Oh! it may be summed up in a few words," said the Marquis. "There were four sisters of the name of Halkin: the eldest was called Lydia, the second Anne, the third Melissa, and the fourth Lilian They were left orphans at an early age—with a very moderate income for their joint support—and they lived somewhere in the neighbourhood of Rochester, I believe. The eldest, Lydia Halkin, is reported to have been a virtuous woman: but she was the plainest of them all, the other three being remarkable for their beauty. Anne, the second sister, became the mistress of my cousin, Mr. Owen, to whom she was faithful enough, I fancy. The offspring of their amours was the four girls: and Mr. Owen died when they were young, leaving Anne but indifferently provided for. She was a woman of the world; and I helped her to take the handsome house where she has so long resided at Richmond. An intimacy which she formed with a Bishop, and which was of course conducted with the utmost secrecy and circumspection, kept her afloat in a pecuniary point of view; and when the Bishop died, he left her a little money. So much for Anne, the second of the four Halkin sisters. By the bye, it is somewhat odd that she who belonged to a family of four sisters, should herself have four daughters."

"Well, proceed," said the Prince. "What became of the other Miss Halkins?"

"The third, Melissa Halkin," continued the Marquis, "formed an intimacy with that Sir Archibald Malvern who disappeared in so strange and mysterious a manner three or four months ago——"

"What! has he never been heard of since?" exclaimed the Regent. "I knew him—he was a good fellow——"

"He has never been heard of for the last three or four months, I can assure your Royal Highness," said the Marquis. "His son Valentine, whom I saw a few days ago, is still overwhelmed with grief and uncertainty relative to his father: and although Lawrence Sampson, the Bow Street officer, has been employed to unravel the mystery, no clue has been obtained to Sir Archibald's fate. But as I was telling you, sir, Melissa Halkin, the third sister, became the mistress of Sir Archibald when he was quite a young man: and there were children issuing from the connexion, I believe—but I am not sure. Mrs. Owen does not like to talk of Melissa, who died early and under painful circumstances. But I know not what they were. The fourth sister, Lilian Halkin, became the mistress of a young clergyman whose name I never heard—or if I did hear it, I have forgotten it. One thing is however certain, that she was involved in some trouble relative to the sudden and mysterious death of her illegitimate child by this clergyman: and I think she was even committed to gaol and tried for the murder—but I am not sure. Neither do I know what has become of her, nor whether she is alive or dead. I believe that Mrs. Owen is equally ignorant on the point—for she and Lilian were never on good terms with each other. Melissa was Mrs. Owen's favourite sister——"

"Well—but what became of the eldest Miss Halkin—the virtuous one, as you called her?" inquired the Prince of Wales, considerably interested in the narrative of the four sisters.

"I cannot say. Mrs. Owen herself is completely ignorant upon this point. Years and years have passed," continued Lord Leveson, "since she heard anything of her eldest sister, whom she therefore believes to have been long since dead. And now, sir, you are acquainted with as much as I myself have ever learnt relative to the Halkin family."

"It is a strange narrative," said the Prince. "But I must now take my leave of you Leveson. By the bye, to-morrow is your day for waging the warfare of love in respect to Venetia——"

"But I shall of course abandon my turn," remarked the nobleman, with a slight embarrassment of look and hesitation of manner,—"after the explanations which have taken place between us."

"That is precisely the course which I expected you to adopt," said the Prince of Wales, who did not notice the singularity of mien on the part of Leveson.

His Royal Highness then took his leave; and the Marquis remained alone to ruminate upon the disappointment which he seemed destined to experience with regard to Venetia Trelawney.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MEETING AND THE SECOND SEPARATION.

It was a little past nine in the evening; and the beautiful Louisa Stanley was seated by the bed-side of her afflicted aunt, who was sleeping profoundly. Lights were burning upon the table near the couch; and Louisa held a book in her hand — but her thoughts were fixed upon Jocelyn.

It was Tuesday morning that he had left Canterbury—and he had promised Louisa that his absence would not probably be more than three days: at all events he had expressed his certainty that it would not extend beyond a week. This was only Thursday evening—and she was wondering whether he would return next day, or whether the morning's post would bring her a letter announcing the exact period when she might expect him.

In the middle of her reflections the sounds of an approaching vehicle met her ears; and as she listened with a sort of presentient eagerness and hope, she heard the chaise drive up to the garden gate.

"It is he!" she exclaimed, flinging down the volume: then, with a glance at her relative to assure herself that the afflicted lady still slept, the young maiden hurried from the room.

The servant girl who had likewise heard the chaise drive up, was already hastening to open the gate;—but Louisa sped past her—and in a few moments the affectionate being was clasped in the arms of her lover.

"Dearest, dearest Louisa!" exclaimed Jocelyn, as he pressed her to his bosom.

"You are returned safe, heaven be thanked!" murmured Louisa, her gentle heart fluttering with ineffable emotions of chastest, purest joy.

"But I am not alone, dear girl," said Loftus, when the first ebullition of transport had somewhat subsided. "I have brought with me a young lady on whom you must bestow the kind regard and compassionate sympathy which your generous disposition will not refuse when you are acquainted with her sad history."

The noblest mind and the purest affection are too often prone to be susceptible of jealousy: but Louisa Stanley was an exception to the general rule. She was too innocent—too artless—too unsophisticated to dream of the possibility of Jocelyn loving another: she judged him by herself—and she erred not in so doing—for he was in every way deserving of her confidence.

Therefore, when she beheld Mary Owen and heard the manner in which her lover introduced the unhappy young lady to her notice and recommended her to her sympathies, Louisa at once and unhesitatingly proffered her hand, saying, "You are welcome to my humble abode."

The kindness of tone in which these words were uttered and the endearing gentleness of Louisa's manner, instantaneously touched the most susceptible chords in Miss Owen's heart; and yielding to the impulse of this sudden effusion of feeling, she threw herself into the young maiden's arms and wept upon her bosom as she murmured forth her thanks for the tender welcome just vouchsafed.

The chaise was dismissed — Louisa conducted Jocelyn and Miss Owen into her neat little parlour —and Mary the servant-girl bustled about to spread the table with the contents of her larder. The lamp was lighted—the curtains were drawn over the windows—and an air of comfort pervaded the room. Jocelyn and Louisa exchanged looks of the profoundest, holiest love,—and an affectionate pressure of the hands again conveyed a mutual assurance of the joy which they experienced at thus meeting once more, although their separation had been so short. Even poor Mary Owen began to appear more cheerful, at the spectacle of the innocent happiness and pure delight which she thus witnessed.

After supper, Miss Owen expressed a desire to withdraw to the chamber which had been prepared for her reception,—not only because she was much wearied, but likewise because she knew that Jocelyn and Louisa must naturally have many things to say to each other. And it was so: for on the one hand the young gentleman had to recite the particulars of his interview with Clara, and also to narrate to his well-beloved as much as with propriety and delicacy he could tell of Mary Owen's sad history; while on the other hand, Louisa had to undertake the painful task of describing the outrage which she had experienced on the part of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

Jocelyn Loftus felt his blood boil with indignation as he heard this narrative; and starting from his seat, he vowed that he would hasten without delay and overwhelm the infamous Bernard Audley with reproaches. But Louisa besought him, with tears in her eyes, to calm himself; and when she placed in his hands the letter written by the lady in black, he yielded to her entreaties that he would take time to deliberate ere adopting any particular course with regard to the Minor Canon. He then expressed his satisfaction that Louisa had thus frankly communicated the particulars of the outrage, instead of withholding them from him, as she might have done through the best of motives: but the young lady declared that she never should retain anything secret from him whom she loved and in whom she placed all her confidence.

Reverting to a more agreeable topic, the lovers again spoke of Clara Stanley. Jocelyn assured Louisa that her sister was in the enjoyment of the best health and was no doubt happy; and he then produced the packet of which he was the bearer. It contained a letter and a complete set of diamonds which Clara stated that the bounty of Mr. and Mrs. Beckford enabled her to send as a gift to her beloved sister. The epistle was a long one, and full of the tenderest assurance of affection and the best possible advice most delicately and feelingly conveyed. Louisa wept over that fond communication from her sister—a communication which she valued ten thousand times more than the splendid present that accompanied it.

The conversation between the lovers now turned upon Mary Owen; and, without alluding to the infamous means which had been adopted to corrupt and demoralize the minds of the four sisters, Jocelyn explained sufficient to render Louisa acquainted not only with Mary's sorrowful position, but also with the atrocious conspiracy that was afoot against the peace, happiness, and honour of the injured Princess of Wales.

Louisa was naturally shocked when she learnt that such cold-blooded and diabolical villany was in the course of perpetration;—and she shed tears at the thought of the position in which the unfortunate wife of the Prince Regent was placed. And while those tears yet glistened upon her long lashes, she exclaimed, "O Jocelyn! surely, surely you will warn the Princess of the terrible dangers which environ her!"

"Ah! my beloved Louisa," he cried, carrying her fair hand to his lips, "I am rejoiced that this suggestion should have emanated from you! You feel for one of your own sex, although personally a stranger to you;—and you would not be happy if you thought that this tremendous secret which has come to our knowledge, were to remain locked up in our own breasts. No—it must be breathed elsewhere—it must be communicated to the Princess herself—and she must be placed upon her guard against the machinations of her enemies. But by the agents and creatures of these enemies is she no doubt already so completely surrounded, that her very letters are liable to interception—the sanctity of any correspondence addressed to her will probably be violated—and it must therefore be by verbal communication and a personal interview that the solemn warning can alone be given to her in safety."

"Oh! my beloved Jocelyn," exclaimed Louisa, the tears streaming down her cheeks, "it is for you to fly and impart that solemn warning to the persecuted Princess Caroline! Even were the adoption of this course to delay our union for many months instead of a few weeks, I am not so selfish as to study my own happiness to the prejudice of an injured, wronged, and outraged woman. It is a Christian duty to warn her of the conspiracy which is multiplying all its dreadful engines of destruction around her."

"Louisa, your conduct on this occasion is most noble—most admirable," exclaimed Jocelyn, as he contemplated the beautiful girl with all the enthu-

plasm of the heart's profoundest devotion. "If anything had been wanting to convince me of the generosity of your nature—the kindness of your disposition—and the delicate tenderness of your feelings, the proof would now be afforded me. With your concurrence, then, my well-beloved, I will to-morrow set off for the Continent:—the Princess is now, I believe, in Italy—but my journey shall be rapid—my mission executed with promptitude—and my return as expeditious as possible."

"Yes—we must consent to separate thus for a short time," said Louisa, as she fell upon Jocelyn's neck and gave free vent to her feelings.

They now separated—the young gentleman taking an affectionate leave of the charming maiden, but with a promise to be at the cottage soon after nine o'clock in the morning. He repaired to the hotel in Canterbury to which the post-chaise had already taken his portmanteau; and retiring to rest, the slumber that visited his eyes was serene and pleasant, not only from the consciousness of duties fulfilled or good intentions planned, but also because the image of his Louisa appeared to visit him in his dreams and shed upon him the holy influence of her sweetest smiles.

On the ensuing morning Jocelyn Loftus rose early: and the Cathedral clock was proclaiming the hour of eight as he knocked at the door of the Minor Canon's residence. To his inquiry whether the Reverend Bernard Audley could be seen so early upon business of importance, the domestic answered in the affirmative; and he was at once conducted into a back parlour where the Canon was seated at breakfast. He started and turned pale on beholding Jocelyn Loftus: but instantly recovering himself, he assumed an air of the blandest courtesy as he requested him to be seated.

Jocelyn bowed with cold hauteur, and remained standing.

"Mr. Audley," he said, in a firm and impressive tone, "the words I have to address to you are few—but I pray that they may receive your earnest attention now and your fullest consideration hereafter. I returned last evening to Canterbury, and learnt with what amount of indignation, abhorrence, and disgust, you may perhaps be able to conceive, the atrocious outrage perpetrated by you against an innocent, gentle, and virtuous young lady. Were you to experience at my hands the treatment you merit, an uncompromising exposure would take place, and the Archbishop would at once be led to deal with you according to your deserts. Or perhaps the civil authorities might be appealed to, and the power of the magistrate be called into requisition to show the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley that neither his patrician connexions nor his holy garb can protect him when he violates the law. But I do not wish to create a scandal upon the present occasion. Several reasons prompt me to deal mercifully with you. The first is an anxiety to spare the already too much outraged feelings of Miss Louisa Stanley the necessity of undergoing any further pain by introducing her into a court of justice. The second is because a lady who is your *victim*,"—and Jocelyn bent his looks significantly upon the Minor Canon, who quailed beneath them,—"has appealed to Miss Louisa Stanley's mercy on your behalf. There are other motives which prompt me to exercise forbearance: but those I have specified are the principal inducements. And now, sir, am I to expect that you will henceforth leave Miss Stanley unmolested, during the short time that she may continue to dwell at her present residence?"

"Mr. Loftus," said the Minor Canon, veiling all the darkest passions of his soul beneath an aspect of assumed humility and contrition,—"I am fully aware that you are treating me more mercifully than I deserve. I shall say nothing about my sorrow—my repentance—for what has passed——"

"Of repentance I do not believe you susceptible, sir," exclaimed Jocelyn, sternly. "God forbid that I should allege without reason that any man's heart is thoroughly hardened: but the conversation which I one evening accidentally overheard in the Cathedral cloisters between yourself and that unfortunate lady——"

"For heaven's sake, allude to it not, Mr. Loftus!" cried the Canon, in a tone of piercing entreaty. "The walls have ears—you may be overheard——"

"Alas! that men, especially the ministers of the Gospel, should be guilty of deeds that bear not mention even in a whisper!" said Jocelyn, with a strong accentuation upon his words. "But I fear, sir, that from the conversation which took place in the cloister, and to which I have referred, your heart is utterly steeled against every principle of honour and integrity—and that it is not accessible to repentance! Nay, more—if the dark allusions and mysterious hints which I then overheard, and which passed between yourself and that unhappy woman who is doubtless the same that rescued Miss Louisa Stanley from your power,—if those allusions, I say, were to be duly weighed and considered, would they not point to some crime whereof you have been guilty?"

"Mr. Loftus, you dare not draw such an inference from the ravings of a mad woman!" exclaimed the Minor Canon, vehemently.

"I do not choose to be uncharitable, sir—nor to suffer even my own secret thoughts to exaggerate the impressions which they receive. But a less cautious person than myself would draw strange and even terrible deductions from the deliberate accusations and measured upbraidings which you now term the ravings of a demented female. No, sir—that lady who is your *victim*, has *not* lost the use of her senses: she possesses them with an acuteness and a keenness that render her wrongs intolerable to think of. However, sir," exclaimed Jocelyn, "I will not dwell upon that subject. My principal aim in visiting you, was to declare that if you should again attempt the slightest molestation towards Miss Louisa Stanley, the authorities shall be appealed to—all I know or suspect concerning you shall be unhesitatingly made public—and, while your gown is torn from your back, your character shall be held up to universal scorn and execration."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn Loftus bowed coldly and quitted the room, leaving the Minor Canon a prey to all the blackest feelings of rage, hatred, malignity, and vindictiveness that ever boiled like a lava-stream in the heart of man.

It was nine o'clock when Jocelyn reached the cottage, where he was welcomed by his beloved Louisa and Mary Owen. He sate down to break-

fast with them: and afterwards he communicated to the latter young lady his intention of proceeding on the Continent to obtain an interview with the Princess Caroline. He promised, however, to compromise Mary's sisters as little as might be; and to use every endeavour to persuade them to withdraw from the detestable service in which they were engaged. Mary Owen thanked him with tears in her eyes for these assurances on his part; and having bade him farewell, she remained in the parlour while Louisa and himself walked alone together in the garden.

Jocelyn now communicated to his beloved the step which he had taken in respect to the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley; and he expressed his conviction that she would receive no farther molestation at the hands of that individual.

The hour for separation now arrived, Jocelyn having ordered a post-chaise to be in readiness for him at the hotel by mid-day. Long and fervid was the parting embrace of the enamoured pair,—deep and earnest the vows which they repeated,—pure and tender the kisses which they exchanged. At length Jocelyn tore himself away from his weeping betrothed: she watched him until he was out of sight;—and then, hurrying to her own chamber, she gave free vent to her tears.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE READING OF A CHARACTER.

If we look into the comfortable parlour at Mr. Lawrence Sampson's house in Long Acre, at about ten o'clock on this same Friday morning of which we are now writing, we shall again behold the Bow Street officer and his guest, Jack the Foundling, seated in conversation at the breakfast-table,—ample justice having been done to the repast.

"Now, my boy," said Larry Sampson, pouring out a glass of that same rich cordial wherewith he had regaled the youth on the preceding day and which had so much warmed the lad's heart towards him,—"I begin to fancy that I have obtained a full and complete insight into your disposition: and I will tell you exactly what it is, if you will allow me. In plain terms, I will read you your character."

"Do so, Mr. Sampson," observed the Foundling; "since you appear to wish it."

"Yes—I wish it," replied the officer, "because I want to convince you that whatever I may do for you, is done by me with my eyes open, so that you must not fancy you are able to outwit Larry Sampson in the slightest degree."

"I don't exactly understand you, sir," said the Foundling, his face becoming scarlet, as if he now saw that the officer had penetrated into those secret thoughts which he had fondly and vainly fancied to be well concealed in the depths of his soul.

"You need not annoy nor vex yourself with apprehensions concerning what I am about to say," continued Larry. "Rome was not built in a day—and you cannot get rid of evil habits, propensities, and thoughts in twenty-four hours. You have been reared in a school of artifice, duplicity, and deceit: and those tendencies cling to you with the inveteracy of rags upon a beggar. But now drink your cordial—and then listen to me."

"I am all attention, sir," replied the lad, as soon as he had disposed of his liqueur.

"When I proposed yesterday morning, in Fleet Lane, that you should come and pass a day or two with me," resumed Sampson, "Daniel Coffin was evidently well pleased—and he rushed after you, with the pretext of telling you to put on your best clothes. But in reality, when he was alone with you, he enjoined you to fish as much out of Larry Sampson as you possibly could:"—and as the officer thus spoke, he looked the Foundling very hard in the face.

"How do you know that, sir?" inquired the lad, colouring deeply.

"Simply from experience," was the calm response: "and now that tell-tale blush upon your cheeks confirms my suspicion. Well, I knew therefore that I was bringing a spy home to my house: but I did not mind that. I had my intentions concerning you, because I pitied your lot—I also felt interested in your future welfare. You entered my abode with the purpose of making the best of all you might see and hear: but we had not talked long together before you forgot your original aim and grew absorbed in the topics of our discourse. As the day wore on, you felt better and better disposed towards me: and last evening you had become modelled as it were to such an improved state of mind, that you were deeply touched by the pictures which I drew of the advantages of an honest life and a good character. We have now been conversing a couple of hours this morning—and you seem anxious to enter upon a right path if you had the opportunity. Now, is all this true or not?" demanded Sampson, again looking the youth fixedly in the face.

"It is perfectly true, sir," was the response.

"But on the other hand," resumed the officer, there are moments when you think to yourself what a fool you are to give way to anything savouring of contrition for the past; and you feel a certain restlessness and uneasiness which invariably accompany a transition phase in the human mind. Now it will take some time and trouble to redeem you thoroughly: but it would only need the temptation of a moment and but a few words of persuasion on the part of the tempter to drag you back again into the slough of demoralization. You have been so trained in the school of duplicity and deceit, that a purely straight-forward line of conduct would become positively irksome, as it were, for a time. It is the difference between the mind's utter abandonment on the one hand, and a wholesome restraint on the other. But you are not so utterly lost that your redemption is impossible: and that redemption I will take in hand, if you will permit me."

"Ah! sir, how can I refuse such an offer?" exclaimed the Foundling, speaking with an impulse of the fullest sincerity at the moment.

"Then you accept it?" said Larry, inquiringly.

"I do—beyond all chance of recalling my words," responded the youth.

"And you will undergo the exact training which I shall specify?"

"I will follow your commands and instructions in all things."

"Now answer me one more question, boy," said the officer. "Instead of being a thief yourself, would you like to be a thief-catcher?"

"If you had asked me that question the first thing yesterday morning, sir," remarked the lad, "I should have at once said '*No.*' But now—after all you have told me about your own adventures—the advice you have given me—and the interest you have taken in my behalf, I cannot say '*No*' so decisively. And yet I don't exactly like to say '*Yes.*'"

"I am glad you have answered me in that manner," said Larry. "But inveterately addicted to habits of duplicity and trickery as you are, you cannot put them off all in a moment as you would a rusty garment. You must first direct their use, as it were, into a new channel, so that they may gradually take a new form and shape and expand from low cunning into a loftier astuteness. Such a transition may be effected by placing you out of the career of crime as a practitioner, and placing you in its track as a pursuer. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly," was the reply. "And for this reason you wish me to become a thief-taker—a pupil of your own?"

"Such is my wish. If you accept my proposal, you shall live here with me—fare every day as you have already fared beneath my roof—have plenty of pocket-money and leisure for rational amusements—and in time, if you behave well, become a regular established constable of Bow Street. Now, what say you?"

"That I accept your proposal on certain conditions," was the answer.

"Name your terms," said Larry.

"First, that you never ask me to do any harm to Dick and Sally Melmoth, whom I look upon as a brother and sister," observed the Foundling.

"Agreed," exclaimed Larry. "Go on."

"Secondly, that you avail yourself, when you have leisure, of your extraordinary skill and keenness in ferretting out things, to discover who my parents were or are."

"Agreed also," ejaculated the Bow Street officer. "Go on."

"And thirdly, that you never insist upon my doing anything in a direct manner to injure Daniel Coffin: for though he is rough and brutal at times—indeed, very often—yet as I have lived with him so long ——"

"I understand—and I give you credit for the feeling," said Larry. "I therefore promise never to employ you in a direct manner to do anything that may injure Daniel Coffin."

"I have no other conditions to name," observed the Foundling.

"Our bargain is therefore complete," said Larry. "But now I want you to give me a proof of your sincerity by answering me one question—and only one question relative to any past transaction in which I believe you to have been engaged."

"Speak—and you shall see whether I mean to act straightforward, or not," replied Jack the Foundling.

"Tell me, then," said Larry, fixing his eyes with such a peculiar steadfastness and penetration upon the youth that it seemed as if he were determined there should be no escape from the influence of that glance,—"tell me whether you formed one of that party of eight who committed the outrage on the Prince of Wales last Monday night?"

"I was," returned the lad, with a sudden start, the nature of the question being evidently so little anticipated by him. "But is there any disturbance to be made about it?" he inquired anxiously.

"Not at all," answered Larry. "Only I of course know all about it: everything of that kind comes to my ears, either directly or indirectly, as you may readily suppose. It was a curious affair altogether: but I dare say that you yourself do not half comprehend its aim and meaning. One of these days I will tell you all about it ——"

"But was it not, then, for purposes of robbery only?" inquired the lad.

"Not altogether. You and your comrades were detained more than an hour at the house," observed Larry Sampson, carelessly; "and that was a much longer time than was necessary to ease the Prince and the Marquis of their property."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the lad. "I did not think of that before. Besides, when I reflect upon the affair—now that you have given me the hint—it would have been easier to do the robbery at the moment the carriage was stopped in the Kew Road, than take it all the way to Wandsworth for the purpose."

"As a matter of course," observed Sampson. "But I suppose you got something to drink there—you and the other fellows—and so you did not observe how long you were detained at the house."

"Why, to tell you the truth," said the Foundling, "when we had taken the carriage into the gate-way of Beechey Manor, four or five of us went out—put our masks in our pocket—and got some drink at the *Blue Lion* which is only fifty yards off."

"Nothing can be done without drink, it seems," observed Larry, smiling: then, rising from his chair, he observed, "I have some little business to attend to, this forenoon, Jack; and so I must leave you till two or three o'clock. But here's money for you—and I thought that if you liked to go to the Tower and see the wild beasts, or do something to amuse yourself till dinner-time, it would be as well."

"I would rather remain here, with your permission, and look at your books, sir," replied the lad.

"Ah! you mean that as a hint to remind me of the promise I made to show you my private memoranda," exclaimed the officer, laughing: "but I can't look them out for you this morning. To-morrow, perhaps——"

"Pray don't inconvenience yourself, Mr. Sampson," said the Foundling. "I shall find plenty of occupation with the books on the shelf there."

"Be it so," observed the officer. "And if you want anything, Dame Margery will attend to your orders."

Mr. Lawrence Sampson then quitted the room: and proceeding to the private chamber which has already been noticed as his *sanctum*, he remained there for about a quarter of an hour. On issuing forth again, he was clad in a disguise so complete that even his most familiar friends would not have known him: and passing out of the dwelling by a back door opening into a court behind, he pursued his way to the Strand where he entered a hackney-coach, ordering the driver to proceed quick to a locality which he named.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE POSTMAN.

BEECHEY MANOR, in the immediate vicinage of Wandsworth, which is between six and seven miles from the centre of London, was an old building, spacious, and having a gate-way in one of its wings. It stood at a distance of about fifty yards from the main road, and was approached by a shady lane. At the point where the lane thus branched off from the road, stood a small public-house bearing the sign of the *Blue Lion;* and a board, daubed with a ferocious specimen of the cerulean animal, swung crazily and creakingly over the door.

The Manor belonged to a certain General Beechey, whose profligacy and extravagance had compelled him to fly from the country a few months previously to the date of our narrative; and in the interval the house had remained pretty nearly unoccupied, save and except so far as will presently transpire.

It was about half-past twelve o'clock on the Friday of which we are writing, that a postman, duly apparelled in the official costume and carrying a bundle of letters in his hand, entered the *Blue Lion* in that bustling, hurried manner which is wont to characterise individuals in that department of the Government service.

"Glass of ale," he said, with a corresponding rapidity of utterance, to the landlord at the bar: and while the latter was drawing the beer, the postman asked, "Who are the people up at the Manor now?"

"I know nothing more about them than their name," replied the landlord, as he handed the glass of ale.

"And what is their name?" inquired the postman, examining the superscription of a letter with great intentness: "for I'll be hanged if I can make it out with this queer writing."

"Bradshaw—Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw," said the landlord.

"To be sure!—so it is!" ejaculated the postman: then, having tossed off the ale, he observed as he tendered the halfpence in payment, "They haven't been there long—have they?"

"Only a few days—a week or so, as near as I can guess," answered the landlord. "But you are a new man in this letter-delivery district, ain't you?"

"Yes—only put on temporary," was the reply. "That's capital ale of your's. I'll take another glass. One doesn't get such ale as this every day in the week."

"I believe you," exclaimed the landlord, highly flattered by the homage thus done to his liquor: and well he might be, inasmuch as it had far more of the taste of vinegar and the appearance of muddy fluid, than the twang of the hop or the transparency of genuine ale.

"Have you seen these Bradshaws at all?" inquired the postman carelessly, as he sipped the ale. "I think they must be the same that used to live up Islington way, when I was on that beat two or three years ago: and if so, they're capital people. Always came down with a present at Christmas and a drop of something short on a cold night."

"I have seen the gentleman once or twice," answered the landlord. "He's an elderly man—very agreeable to talk to—and loves a drop of good drink. He says my brandy beats the best French he ever tasted."

"Ah! then I suppose he has been in France?" said the postman.

"It appears so from what he tells me. I haven't seen the lady—she doesn't go out much, if at all: her husband told me she wasn't in good health——"

"Do they keep up any establishment at all?" inquired the letter-deliverer.

"No—not a bit," was the reply. "When General Beechey went away some months ago, he left an old man and a woman—that is, the old man's wife—to take care of the place; and they are the only servants now at the Manor. So I suppose that the Bradshaws don't intend to make a long stay of it. Old Tom Underdown—that's the man—comes here of an evening to smoke his pipe and take his pint; and he tells me that Mrs. Bradshaw is a beautiful woman. He doesn't think that she and her husband lead a very pleasant life together: for they're constantly quarrelling."

"Ah! then they are the same Bradshaws of whom I spoke just now," exclaimed the postman, as he paid for his second glass of ale. "Good day, landlord."

And with this hurried farewell, he quitted the *Blue Lion*, proceeding on his way towards the Manor, which he reached in a few minutes.

Instead of going up to the front entrance, he passed into the gateway, and found, as he seemed to have anticipated, that there was a side-door belonging to the house. He gave the usual postman's knock; and after some delay an old woman made her appearance.

"Mr. Bradshaw at home?" inquired the postman.

"No. You can give any letters to me," was the answer.

"I have none for him now," said the postman: "but I want to make an inquiry about a particular letter——"

"Well, I tell you he isn't at home," interrupted the old woman, querulously: and she was about to close the door.

"If Mrs. Bradshaw is at home, she will do as well as her husband," said the postman. "Come—I can't stand here all day—I'm not paid for losing my time——"

"Wait a minute," said the old woman: and she hurried off as quick as she could to deliver the postman's message.

In a short time she re-appeared, requesting this individual to walk in. He accordingly entered the hall, and was conducted by old Mrs. Underdown, as he conjectured the crone to be, up a wide and handsome staircase to a spacious landing. There the woman threw open a door—and the postman was ushered into a large and elegantly-furnished apartment, where a lady of great beauty was seated upon a sofa.

She looked very hard at the postman as he entered the room and made a bow: but speedily resuming an easy manner and indifferent mien, she appeared to wait the explanation of his business.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, for intruding," he said: "but I've got a letter addressed to General Beechey, and it's marked outside that it's to be forwarded to

his address if he isn't at the Manor, as it is very important. Now as I've heard that the General is *not* here——"

"You had better leave it with me, my good man," said the lady: "and I will take care that it shall be forwarded to the General in due course."

"I can't do that, ma'am," was the reply. "The Post Office orders are positive. No offence, ma'am — but the letter mustn't be trusted out of my hands."

"And you say it is marked as very important?" observed the lady, in a musing tone, as if she were deliberating what course she ought to pursue.

"Yes—'*highly important and in haste*,' ma'am," answered the postman, referring to the address of one of the letters which he held in his hand.

"I think I can give you the General's address abroad," said the lady, as a thought seemed to strike her. "At least, I am very much mistaken if it is not in my husband's possession. He is not at home at this moment—but perhaps I shall find it in his writing-desk. Wait a few minutes."

"Certainly, ma'am," said the postman.

The lady accordingly rose and quitted the room.

In about five minutes she returned with a piece of paper in her hand.

"There is the General's address," she said. "It is my husband's own writing, as he himself took it down the last time he saw the General. You may therefore rely upon the address being the accurate one."

"Shall I take a copy of it, ma'am?" inquired the postman: "or may I keep it?"

"You may keep it," responded the lady. "I have already copied it in case my husband should forget it."

"I am very much obliged, ma'am, for the trouble you have taken: and I'm sorry to have intruded upon you so long. Good afternoon, ma'am."

With these words, the postman put the paper into his pocket and retired.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FRIDAY: OR, THE FIFTH SUITOR.

IT was nine o'clock in the evening—and a private carriage was waiting at Hyde Park corner. The coachman sate upon his box, ready to impel the spirited steeds forward the instant the expected person should arrive: and the footman stood close by the door, holding the handle ready to open it.

The carriage had no arms upon the panels—and the domestics wore plain great coats over their liveries. The equipage had been waiting there for half-an-hour; but it was not until the clocks were striking nine, that a lady, closely veiled and muffled in a cloak, made her appearance. The door was instantly opened—the fair one stepped in—and the footman whispered, "His Royal Highness desires his compliments, ma'am, and has made arrangements to receive the honour of your visit at the house of a friend."

The door was then closed—the steps put up—and, as the footman leapt up behind the carriage, it drove rapidly away.

"Now," said Venetia Trelawney to herself, as the announcement she had just heard still rang in her ears,—"some treachery is intended—and I think I can fathom it. The Prince has been weak and foolish enough to boast of his triumph and mention our appointment—and the friend to whom he has thus unbosomed himself, is taking advantage of the incident. But I will allow the adventure to take its course."

And throwing herself back in the carriage, Venetia watched from the window the direction it was pursuing.

Along Piccadilly it sped: round the corner into Albemarle Street it turned—and the next moment the equipage dashed up to the front of the Marquis of Leveson's mansion.

"I thought as much," said Venetia to herself: and even in the obscurity of the vehicle, with no one to receive the withering influence of her scorn, did her lips wreathe for a moment into a smile of ineffable contempt.

The footman opened the door of the carriage at the same moment that the portals of the mansion itself were unfolded: and Venetia, still keeping the veil close over her countenance, tripped with graceful lightness into the marble hall. A page in an elegant costume was waiting to conduct her: and she followed him up the handsome, well-lighted staircase into a drawing-room decorated with crimson hangings and furnished in a corresponding style.

The page instantaneously withdrew—and Venetia was alone.

Undismayed by the position in which she found herself, and into which indeed she had allowed herself to be hurried, she tranquilly and deliberately took off her bonnet and veil, and laid aside her cloak. She then appeared in an elegant evening costume of dark velvet, which not only by its make set off her charms to their utmost advantage, but likewise by its hue displayed all the dazzling brilliancy and transparent fairness of her complexion.

Her hair was arranged in massive tresses, which fell upon her shoulders so bright in their alabaster purity, and so plump in their softly rounded fulness. That glorious hair displayed, in the lustre of the lamps that lighted the room, all its richest hues of auburn—shining like gold in some parts, and dark as a glossy velvet in others where the shade remained. The body of her dress was cut exceedingly low, the bosom rising grandly above it rather than being imprisoned within it: and her arms, naked to the very shoulder, displayed the robust symmetry of their rounded proportions.

There was a slight flush upon her cheeks—but not a hectic one: merely a deepening of the natural carnation, and dying away in healthy transition into the purity of the lily. Her eye-lids drooped not now, but were fully raised—and thus the deep blue orbs themselves shone with an expression of firmness and decision instead of looking tender and melting with their wonted languor.

As she sate upon the crimson sofa on which she had thrown herself, the dark velvet dress displayed the fineness of her form, and by its very folds might have assisted the eye to trace the sweeping length of the limbs which the flowing robe in reality concealed. But upon an ottoman rested one beautiful foot—and the skirt of the dress was just raised sufficiently to allow a glimpse of a slender and well-rounded ankle, with its flesh-coloured silken hose and its neatly tied sandal.

The picture was ravishing to a degree—enchant-

ing beyond all power of description. Were Cleopatra such a woman as Venetia Trelawney, it can be no matter of wonder if Mark Anthony could reconcile himself to the loss of the empire of the Roman world for a being so goddess-like as she. Poets may have dreamt of a loveliness without fault—romancists may have laboured to describe a beauty without imperfection—and artists may have transferred to canvass the glowing image of their enraptured conception of woman's charms: but never did bard behold in the most beatific of his visions—never did novelist conjure up in his happiest mood—and never did painter pourtray in the sublimest hours of his genius, a being more transcendently lovely than Venetia Trelawney.

She was one of those women for whose sake the enthusiastic lover would not only dare every peril and encounter every horror that the circumstances of life could possibly afford for such an ordeal; but she was one to win whose smiles and gain whose favours a man might consent to plunge headlong into the abyss of crime. To be allowed to toy with those golden tresses—to pass the hand over that damask cheek—to press the lips to that rich red mouth—to pillow the head upon that heaving bosom—to be clasped in those warm and rounded arms—and to know that all these delights were but the prelude to those elysian joys that would not be refused,—Ah! this indeed were to experience the realization of paradise upon earth!

But to resume our narrative in due course.

Venetia Trelawney had not been many minutes alone in the Crimson Drawing-Room, when she suddenly observed that a door facing where she sate was partially open. She looked round, and at once became satisfied that it was not the door by which she had entered the room; and she was equally certain it was not standing thus half open when she was first introduced into the apartment. What, then, could it mean? Was there some one

in the place with which that door communicated?—and was a tacit invitation thus conveyed for Venetia to enter thither?

She asked herself these questions: but, being unable to solve them even in conjecture, she remained calmly and tranquilly where she was, disdaining to trouble herself or even to gratify her curiosity by approaching that open door.

Ten minutes elapsed—and no one came. She consulted her watch and thus ascertained that the time was passing in this manner. Feeling indignant at being kept waiting, she rose and rang the bell violently: then she remained standing in anticipation of the entrance of a servant to answer her summons. But no one came. She rang a second time, more violently than at first: but still her summons was unanswered. The flush upon her cheeks deepened into a vivid scarlet—her eyes flashed fire—her nostrils dilated proudly—and she drew herself up to the full of her noble height, as if longing to encounter some one on whom she might vent her wrath.

She was about to ring a third time: but her pride would not permit her. She felt herself outraged, and resolved to leave the mansion that moment. But as she was about to resume her bonnet and cloak, the thought flashed to her like an inspiration that she was perhaps a prisoner. Not choosing to appear so ridiculous even to herself, as to prepare for departure and then find that she was baffled in her purpose, she advanced to the door by which she had been introduced into the room; and she found it locked. Her apprehension was thus confirmed;—but smiling scornfully, she returned to her seat on the sofa.

Her eyes now again fell upon the door facing her, which stood partially open: and she resolved, after some degree of hesitation, to see whither it led. She accordingly approached the door, and perceived that a light shone from within. She advanced—she reached the threshold—and beheld a small but luxuriously-furnished room, lighted by a silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Sofas were ranged all around against the walls, in the oriental style; and vases of flowers exhaled a delicious perfume. At the extremity of the room another door stood half open; and seeing nobody, Venetia continued to advance.

This second door admitted her into a room still smaller than the one she had just traversed, but still more luxuriously furnished. The carpet was the thickest on which she had ever trodden: there were no sofas, but a number of large and massive arm-chairs, each provided with a cushion of immense size;—and the table in the centre was spread with delicious-looking fruits, confectionary, and sweets in crystal dishes, as well as with wines of numerous descriptions. The scene was lighted by a lamp with a ground-glass globe, so that the lustre was subdued and mellow.

A third door stood open before Venetia's eyes: and, still encountering no human soul, she pursued her way. But now she entered into a gallery where the light was softer and far more subdued than it even was in the refreshment-chamber which she had just traversed; and pausing for a few moments, she perceived that this gallery was filled with pictures and statues. Her curiosity increased: the anger which she had ere now experienced to such a degree was fast merging into a feeling of admiration at the beautiful suite of apartments she was now exploring;—and she advanced farther into the gallery.

The first object which she now contemplated with attention was a sculptured group of the Three Graces, as large as life: but as she gazed upon the exquisite work of art, the thought imperceptibly stole into her mind that instead of being characterised by that charming air of innocence with which those heathen personifications are usually invested, there was something deeply sensuous in the countenances and attitudes of the statues. She passed on to the next group, which represented Leda toying with Jupiter in the form of a swan. The sculpture was exquisite—and at the first glance the effect was a feeling of delight at the survey of so perfect a creation from marble. But by dwelling upon the piece the eye became aware that the softly sensuous air which invested the first group, deepened into a more confirmed voluptuousness with this second one: for the whole attitude of Leda indicated a tremulous longing for some unknown joy, as that amorous dalliance with the disguised god poured its impassioned influence throughout her whole frame.

The effects thus described, as produced by the two first specimens of sculpture, were not however of that decided character which could destroy the more pleasing impression arising from the beautiful perfection of the workmanship. Venetia accordingly advanced to examine the third group, which represented Mars and Venus clasped in each other's arms, and ensnared by the almost invisible but inextricable net-work which the jealous Vulcan had spread to surprise them. As a specimen of art the design and execution were inimitable: but the beauty of the Goddess of Love was so intimately blended with an expression of wantonness, that the very effigy appeared to glow and palpitate as if ready to burst into the ardour of ungovernable passion. But still there was nothing that could possibly shock or disgust the female mind: the impression produced was that of a highly-wrought scene in a novel, where the artifice of well chosen language and the fascinations of poetic description flimsily wrap up the naked truth. Venetia therefore passed on to the fourth group of marble statues: and this represented a Satyr seizing upon a Dryad, or Wood-Nymph, whom he was supposed to have surprised in her nude loveliness as she issued from a stream where she had been bathing.

This specimen, though as admirable as the others in point of art, was nevertheless so flagrant in its undisguised indecency, that Miss Trelawney at once turned away shocked and disgusted: and as she was retreating towards the door by which she had entered the gallery, her eyes fell upon one of the pictures suspended to the wall. The subject was the Rape of the Sabines: in fact, the picture was to a certain degree a copy of Reubens' splendid master-piece that is now preserved at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square:—but the copyist had so enhanced the indelicacy of the scene, and had heightened its details into such voluptuous effects, that it burst upon the gaze like the sudden exposure of an orgie in a brothel.

With glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and palpitating bosom, Venetia Trelawney rushed back into the refreshment-room, where she threw herself into

one of the arm-chairs already noticed. But scarcely had she thus sunk down upon the flocculent cushion, when a sharp click as of some mechanism giving way met her ears—and at the same instant her wrists were caught in manacles which sprang out of the arms of the treacherous chair, while two steel bands started from the richly-carved back and grasped her shoulders. A shriek burst from her lips—she struggled violently, but all to no purpose: for she was a captive—and powerless!

We should observe that the manacles and the steel bands which had thus fastened upon her, were covered with velvet, so that they inflicted no positive injury upon her, nor even produced the slightest abrasion of her fair and polished skin.

Scarcely was she thus caught in the gripe of the treacherous chair, when a door which fitted so admirably into the wall that she had not previously observed its existence, was thrown open—and the Marquis of Leveson stood in her presence.

"My lord," she immediately exclaimed, in a voice of gentle remonstrance, "this is most unworthy treatment towards one who came voluntarily to your mansion, knowing that Friday was *your* day for prosecuting the love-campaign against Venetia Trelawney."

"Ah! you are then acquainted with the secret compact of your six admirers," said the Marquis, in astonishment: "and you are aware of the existence of that wager which I am this night destined to win?"

"I know all, my lord," answered Venetia: "and what is more, I knew when entering the carriage at Hyde Park corner, that it was your equipage and that I was coming to your abode."

"But who acquainted you with the particulars of the compact and the love-campaign?" inquired the Marquis, who had expected to be overwhelmed with reproaches instead of experiencing so much meekness and humility on the part of the beauteous creature on whom his eyes were now fixed with gloating fervour and devouring passion.

"On Wednesday evening," responded Miss Trelawney, in a gentle tone, "Colonel Malpas told me everything."

"But you had intended to abandon yourself to the Prince of Wales, divine being!" exclaimed the Marquis, approaching nearer to her and rivetting his eyes upon the bosom that was palpitating with visible heavings.

"It is true," was Miss Trelawney's ready answer, delivered with an air of charming though mournful sincerity. "But the instant that your footman whispered in my ears the announcement which was intended to beguile me, I read the whole truth as clearly as if it had been explained in detail. I saw that the Prince had treacherously made you his confidant—I remembered that it was your day to adopt proceedings with regard to me—and I understood in a moment that you had availed yourself of the opportunity afforded by the appointment which I had made with his Royal Highness. Unhesitatingly was my mind made up that instant. I resolved to punish the Prince's perfidy by fixing my choice on you and accepting the overtures which I presume you are prepared to make."

"Ah! my dearest Venetia," exclaimed Lord Leveson, "if I had known all this—if I could have anticipated that your thoughts had taken a turn so completely in my favour and that such happiness was in store for me, you would have found me at your feet the instant you entered the drawing-room. But I cannot even now scarcely believe——"

"My lord, listen and I will be candid with you," said Venetia, the earnestness of her looks deepening in expression. "So soon as Colonel Malpas revealed to me the trammels of this compact, conspiracy, or love-campaign—whichever you may please to denominate it—I resolved to accept the overtures of the individual who was most exalted in rank. I therefore chose the Prince. But he has performed a treacherous part in betraying his success to your ears: whereas the proceeding you have adopted to delude me to your mansion, is only as tratagem that may be regarded as legitimate enough in the operations of a love-siege. I therefore resolved, the moment the truth flashed upon my mind in the manner I have described, to discard the Prince and accept your lordship. For next to his Royal Highness is your rank the loftiest of all my suitors, and consequently the more calculated to reflect honour upon me. Had not these been my intentions, I need not have come hither. Your servants would not have dared to retain me a prisoner in the carriage, if I had chosen to leave it: my screams would have aroused all Piccadilly to the rescue. Moreover, think you that when the carriage turned into Albemarle Street, I could any longer remain in doubt, even if I had for a moment experienced any uncertainty upon the point, to whose mansion it was that I was being borne? And had I wished to fly, could I not have done so the instant I descended the steps of the carriage? My lord, you perceive that my conduct in every respect corroborates all I tell you."

"It does—it does, my beloved Venetia," exclaimed the enraptured Marquis, in a delirium of joy and ecstacy at the unexpected turn which the adventure had thus taken. "And you will be mine, Venetia?—you will be mine—wholly mine?"

"I will be your's, my lord," she replied, firmly and deliberately. "You will do all that lies in your power to minister to my happiness——"

"All—everything!" exclaimed the nobleman, trembling with the delicious anticipation of revelling in that divine creature's charms. "Five thousand a year shall be settled upon you, my Venetia: you shall be surrounded with luxuries, enjoyments, and pleasures! Oh! let me hasten to release you from this restraint which I so deeply deplore—let me clasp you in my arms——"

And stepping behind the chair, he touched a spring, the effect of which was instantaneous for the purpose of release: so that the manacles flying from the imprisoned wrists and the steel bands from the ivory shoulders, sank back into the woodwork of the treacherous chair.

"Pardon me this outrage, dearest Venetia—most adored of women!" exclaimed the Marquis, catching her in his embrace as she rose slowly from the seat.

"Ah! it was too bad of you, my lord," she murmured, winding her snowy arms about his neck.

For an instant she abandoned herself to his fervid caresses: but it was only that she might throw him completely off his guard;—for the next moment, with a sudden and dexterous jerk, she flung

him forcibly into the chair whence she had just been released.

The sharp click of the hidden mechanism was heard—the manacles closed upon his wrists—the velvet-covered bands grasped his shoulders—and, with a dreadful imprecation, the Marquis of Leveson found himself caught in his own trap.

Then the whole demeanour and bearing of Venetia Trelawney changed in a moment: the assumed meekness and humility were succeeded by the flush of mingled triumph and indignation—and, drawing her splendid form up to its full height, she looked down upon the enraged and almost frenzied nobleman with a blighting scorn and a crushing contempt.

"Wretch!" she exclaimed, in the swelling tones of her divine voice; "did you dare carry your presumption, your vanity, and your conceit to such an outrageous extent as to believe that I should accept the overtures of so loathsome and repulsive a being as yourself? Miserable imbecile—vile voluptuary, you are now worthily punished! It would only be a righteous and well-merited portion of my vengeance, were I to summon all the menials of your household to contemplate the utter ignomy of their master. But I will spare you this supreme disgrace—this crowning shame: and I will leave you to emancipate yourself from your captivity as best you may! One word more, however, before we part,—and that is to tell you that I did indeed come hither of my own accord—but not to accept your overtures or receive your nauseous love. I came to gratify a sentiment of curiosity—to see how you would carry on *your* campaign—and also to overwhelm you with reproaches and upbraidings for daring to practise your treacherous schemes against me. And now, my lord, you may rest assured that you have naught to expect save loathing, contempt, and scorn at the hands of Venetia Trelawney!"

Pale—trembling all over—shrinking beneath the withering looks of the incensed lady—and as powerless in the embrace of the treacherous chair as she herself had so recently been,—the Marquis of Leveson gasped for utterance—but could speak no word. His throat was as dry and his tongue as parched as if he had been swallowing ashes: and his feelings were scarcely enviable even by a man about to be hung. These feelings, too, were the more poignant, inasmuch as amidst them was entertwined a sense of the opportunity he had lost,—that opportunity which had ere now placed Venetia so completely in his power, and of which he might have availed himself to gratify his passion and consummate a triumph!

With another and last scornful look upon the abject nobleman, she turned away and left the apartment.

Hastening back to the Crimson Drawing Room, she put on her bonnet and cloak—drew the veil over her countenance—and approached the door. But it suddenly struck her that it was locked ere now when she had previously tried it—and so it still was. Nothing daunted, however, she remembered the door by which the Marquis had entered the refreshment-room: and she at once retraced her way thither.

"Miss Trelawney," said the nobleman, in a piteous tone—for in the interval he had recovered the use of his speech,—"I implore you to release me!"

She made no reply—but searched for the means of opening the secret door.

"You will not succeed," he observed, in the same voice of humble entreaty: "but if you will release me, I swear——"

"No, my lord," exclaimed Venetia, firmly: "I will sooner return to the drawing-room—fling open the window—and summon assistance from the street. Now, will you expose yourself to this disgrace?—will you compel me to explain to strangers the infamy of the treatment I have experienced in this house?"

The Marquis deliberated for a few moments; and then he said—"I will tell you how to open that secret door on one condition?"

"Name it," she replied.

"That when you descend into the hall, you will tell the porter to send my valet Brockman to me immediately?" answered the wretched nobleman.

"I consent to do this," rejoined Venetia.

"I rely upon your word," he said. "Now press hard upon that rose on the paper nearest to the handle of the bell-pull."

Venetia did as she was directed—and the door instantaneously flew open. Without bestowing another word or look upon the Marquis, she pursued her way—traversed a small dressing room—thence passed into a bed-chamber—and ultimately emerged upon the landing. With hasty steps she descended the stairs—reached the hall—delivered the nobleman's message to a page whom she encountered there—and the next moment was safe in the open street.

The clocks were at this instant proclaiming the hour of ten: and she hesitated what course to pursue. But speedily making up her mind, she entered a hackney-coach in Piccadilly, ordering it to drive to Carlton House and set her down at the private door.

In a few minutes she reached the princely palace—and remaining in the vehicle until a servant answered the loud knock given by the coachman, she inquired of the lacquey if his royal master were at home. The reply was in the affirmative; and descending from the coach, which she ordered to wait for her, Venetia was at once escorted up a private staircase into a splendidly furnished apartment, where the domestic begged her to be seated. Then, without inquiring her name,—for the lacquey had no doubt that the veiled and cloaked lady came by appointment,—he left the room to inform the Prince of the arrival.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE INTERVIEW.

VENETIA was not kept waiting many minutes before his Royal Highness made his appearance. He was attired in evening costume: his face was slightly flushed with drinking;—but the expression of his countenance was one of mingled joy and surprise as he hastily accosted Miss Trelawney.

"My dear Venetia," he exclaimed, extending his hand, which she did not however take, "this is an unexpected pleasure after your note, which, I can assure you, caused me the greatest pain."

"My note, sir!" she echoed: then instantly com-

prehending that a forgery had been committed by the Marquis of Leveson for the purpose of preventing the Prince's carriage from being at the place of appointment, she said in her usual tranquil manner, "I sent you no communication of any kind, sir."

"Ah! then I perceive that there is something wrong," cried the Prince. "You refuse me your hand—you are offended with me——"

"I have been badly treated, sir,—ungenerously, unhandsomely, discourteously treated," observed Miss Trelawney, who had thrown back her veil but remained standing: and as she spoke, her splendid features were animated with a displeasure amounting almost to indignation.

"Venetia, if I have done anything to offend you," said the Regent, earnestly, "I implore your forgiveness: and when *I* use the word '*implore*,' it can only be addressed to some one whose displeasure I would not for worlds incur. I do not know, Venetia, that this word was ever uttered by me to any woman until now."

"We will enter upon explanations, sir, if you please," replied the fair one, somewhat mollified by the tone, manner, and language of her royal suitor.

"You will do me the honour to be seated," said the Prince, pointing to the sofa.

"Your Royal Highness spoke of some letter which you had received," said Miss Trelawney, as she sate down, while the Prince placed himself near her.

"Here it is," he observed as he took a note from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to her.

She hastily ran her eye over its contents, which were penned in a beautiful female hand and were as follow:—

"Friday Evening, 8 o'clock.

"Miss Trelawney presents her dutiful and affectionate compliments to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and begs to inform His Royal Highness that a severe indisposition, which has suddenly attacked her, will prevent her from keeping her appointment with his Royal Highness this evening.

"Miss Trelawney however entertains the hope that in the course of a few days she shall be enabled to assure his Royal Highness of her restoration to health."

"That note is a forgery, sir," said Venetia, her countenance still glowing with the indignation that crimsoned it the moment she began the perusal of the mendacious missive. "This is not my handwriting, sir—and my presence here is a proof that I am not suffering from any indisposition whatsoever."

"Then, by heavens! it is a foul trick!" exclaimed His Royal Highness: "and I can guess," he added, in the heat of passion, "who is the concocter of the treachery. But what has happened?—where have you been?" he demanded, hastily—his suspicions having instantaneously fallen upon the Marquis of Leveson.

"First let me ask," said Venetia, coldly and reservedly, "to whom your royal Highness communicated all that passed between us yesterday?"

"Ah! now I must indeed implore your pardon—and upon my knees too!" he exclaimed, falling at Venetia's feet—for he saw that she knew all. "I confess that I was fool—dolt—idiot—imbecile enough to make a confidant of a man whom I believed to be a friend! But tell me, Venetia—charming Venetia—is my offence of a gravity beyond all forgiveness?"

"Rise, sir—rise!" said Miss Trelawney. "This humiliation is more than I require—more than I expected——"

"Then you pardon me?" exclaimed the Prince, eagerly.

"I pardon you, sir," responded the lady.

"Oh! thanks—ten thousand thanks!" cried the Regent, seizing her hand in rapture and conveying it to his lips: then, rising from his suppliant posture and resuming his seat by her side, he said in a low deep tone, "You are more generous than I have been, Venetia: but your conduct in thus pardoning me will render me all the more anxious to ensure your happiness."

"Henceforth, sir," remarked Venetia, with softening tone and manner, "I hope that anything which may pass between us, will receive the inviolability which an honourable man is wont to observe under such circumstances?"

"On my soul, Venetia, you shall never—never have to reproach me with breach of confidence for the future!" exclaimed his Royal Highness: then throwing his arms around her, he imprinted a fervid, burning kiss upon her lips.

She gently disengaged herself from his embrace: and he besought her to remove her bonnet and cloak. With this request she at once complied: and then he beheld her in all the splendour of that beauty which was set off to so much advantage by the dark velvet dress she wore, and which had produced so powerful an effect upon the Marquis of Leveson.

"Venetia, you are charming—you are charming!" exclaimed the Prince, as his eyes dwelt gloatingly upon the bare shoulders and the exposed bosom of the superb creature: then once more flinging his arms around her, he drew her towards him—strained her to his breast—and covered her face with warm and impassioned kisses.

"We have not yet finished our explanations," she said, struggling to disengage herself a second time from his embrace.

"No—I will not release you," he exclaimed, holding her with all the force of a frenzied passion that trembled in itself: "I will not release you until your lips have given me back one of those kisses which I have left upon them!"

"There, sir—there!" cried Venetia, bestowing a hurried caress upon her royal lover. "And now release me," she added, with another and successful struggle.

"What explanations have we left unsaid, my angel?" asked the Prince, the blood flowing like molten lead in his veins and his whole being consuming as it were with the fires of an indomitable passion: for the contact of that splendid form and the influence of that kiss were more than enough to madden him with desire.

"Have you no interest—no curiosity in ascertaining what has befallen me this evening?" inquired Venetia, as she smoothed her disordered hair. "Think you that the note which I have just read was penned without a purpose?"

"I had forgotten everything save the pleasure experienced in your divine presence, my angel," exclaimed the Prince. "My head swims with rapturous thoughts—my senses are bewildered with an excess of elysian bliss—my ideas are thrown

into a beatific confusion! But tell me, darling Venetia—tell me what has happened."

"I was faithful to the appointment, sir," replied the lady; "and a carriage was in waiting. It bore me to the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson——"

"Maledictions upon him!" ejaculated the Prince, stamping his foot with rage. "Because I forgot to send him a written promise relative to the trumpery Garter——But proceed, dearest—proceed."

"Oh! the Marquis was so far justified in his proceedings, at least towards your Royal Highness," exclaimed Venetia, with a good-humoured archness, "inasmuch as Friday is *his* day——"

"What! is it possible?" cried the Prince, starting as if electrified. "The particulars of the compact——"

"Are all known to me!" added Miss Trelawney, with a deepening archness of look that rendered her enchantingly wicked.

"But how?" demanded the Prince, overwhelmed with mingled perplexity and confusion. "Did the Marquis himself——"

"No, sir," interrupted Venetia: "his lordship was as much astonished as you are when I convinced him that the entire particulars of the compact made at his house last week, are known to me."

"Then who is the traitor?" inquired the Prince, eagerly.

"Colonel Malpas," was the immediate response.

"The sneaking—despicable—grovelling scoundrel!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "If ever he ventures to appear in my presence again, I will order him to leave it—the treacherous villain!"

"He hoped to ingratiate himself into my favour by telling me everything," continued Venetia. "But I treated him with the contempt he deserved."

"I am glad of it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Henceforth he shall find in me a bitter, unrelenting enemy. But enough of such a miscreant! Tell me what took place between yourself, my Venetia, and the Marquis of Leveson."

"I treated him also as he deserved," responded Miss Trelawney, her countenance glowing with the irradiation of triumph as she thought of the discomfiture of the wretched nobleman whom she had left to an ignominious exposure in the eyes of his valet. "Your Royal Highness need not be angry with the wretched old man when you meet again: I can assure you he is punished enough."

"But how?—tell me how?" exclaimed the Regent, his curiosity tensely excited.

"I left him secure and safe in the trap which has doubtless caught so many who have become his victims," replied Venetia, significantly: and she fixed her gaze upon the Prince to see if he caught her meaning.

"What? in one of his mechanical chairs?" immediately cried his Royal Highness, a suspicion of the truth flashing to his mind: for he was no stranger to the mysteries of the Marquis of Leveson's mansion.

"I see that you understand me, sir," replied Venetia: then, in a few words, she explained the particulars of her adventure with the Marquis.

"This is excellent—capital!" exclaimed the Prince, laughing heartily. "You are indeed right when you say that Leveson has been adequately punished. He has encountered a woman of ingenuity and spirit; and his mortification must be immense. But now that all our explanations are over, Venetia——"

"I must take my departure," said the lady, rising. "It is eleven o'clock—and I dare not remain away any longer. Remember, sir, I stipulated that my reputation was to be preserved as much as possible—and at all events until after the marriage which I propose to contract without delay——"

"Ah! cruel Venetia!" exclaimed the Prince: "you tantalize me with your presence—you drive me mad by permitting partial caresses——"

"Remember, sir, it is not my fault that I was not here long ago," said Venetia. "If you really love me—if you have any regard for my happiness—you will permit me to depart at once. Indeed, the vehicle that brought me hither is waiting——"

"But when shall we meet again, my angel?" inquired the Prince, taking her hand and pressing it between both his own.

"I will write to you—if your Royal Highness will grant me the permission?" said Venetia.

"Permission!" he echoed. "Write to me as often as you please—the oftener the better:—and the sooner also in the first instance, the more agreeable will it be. Ah! Venetia! keep me not long in suspense——"

"I will write soon," she observed. "And now farewell for the present."

"Farewell, my angel—my beauty—my darling!" exclaimed the Regent, catching her in his arms and fastening his lips to her's.

She returned the kiss which he imprinted upon her moist red mouth: then, disengaging herself with some difficulty from the fervid embrace in which he so passionately enfolded her, she threw on her bonnet and cloak, drew down the thick veil, and took her departure.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RETRIBUTION.

It was midnight; and the moon was riding high in the heavens as a hackney-coach stopped in a shady lane branching off from the main road at Blackheath. A lady and gentleman alighted: and the latter, having bade the driver wait for them, gave the former his arm and hurried her down the narrow thoroughfare towards a house which stood at a distance of about a quarter of a mile from where the vehicle had stopped.

Not a word was spoken by either the gentleman or his companion as they thus proceeded at a rapid pace. The former was past the prime of life—tall and stoutly built—of genteel appearance—and well dressed. The lady was considerably younger—very beautiful—and enveloped in an ample cloak.

She trembled from head to foot—yes, trembled as the aspen leaf, with a quivering that influenced her entire frame. But it assuredly was not with cold—for the night was serene and calm—one of those beautiful September nights which lose not the warmth of the autumnal day: and moreover, she was well wrapped up in that thick and capacious mantle. Nevertheless she trembled—but it was with the chill shuddering that takes its rise

from the heart: and her teeth chattered as if it were in the middle of snowy January or bleak March.

The house which this lady and her male companion were approaching, stood in the midst of spacious grounds; and the front garden was enclosed with a wall having a carriage-gate and a smaller door in the centre. But the gentleman and lady paused not at this entrance: they skirted the wall—turned the angle—passed round to the back of the house—and entered the premises by a door which was unfastened.

At a distance of about fifty yards a dim light appeared amidst the trees of the garden in the rear of the house: and in the direction of this light did the gentleman conduct the lady.

"Who is there?—and what are they doing?" suddenly demanded the lady, in a subdued voice of hysterical quickness, as if she full well divined the nature of the answer she should receive to her question, and shuddered at the bare thought thereof.

"There is only one person on that spot," returned the gentleman, in a harsh and almost brutal tone: "and he is digging a grave."

"A grave!" murmured the lady, repeating the awful words in that mechanical and involuntary way which denotes the profound concentration of the direst horror.

"Yes—a grave," exclaimed her companion, with a brutal abruptness that was alike undisguised and unmistakable. "Surely you might have suspected as much when you saw the light of the lantern gleaming yonder. Besides, what the devil else did we come hither for but to bury the dead man?—and if he's to be buried, there must be a grave, I suppose."

"O God! do not talk in this heartless—callous—brutal manner!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, in a tone of the most touching, penetrating entreaty.

"Then don't be a fool and give way to any maudlin sentimentalism at this moment," retorted the individual whom we must style *a gentleman*, merely to distinguish his rank in life,—although in conduct he assuredly merited the appellation no more than the British Aristocracy deserves to be called humane, or England a free country—the very reverse being the case in both instances.

"Why treat me with this fiendish harshness?" demanded the lady bitterly, as if her feelings were goaded to a pitch of desperation. "Have you any right *now*—after all that has occurred—to punish or even taunt me for the past?"

"Come—let's have no quarrelling, if you please," said the gentleman, sternly. "You hang back? By heaven——"

"Oh! spare me—spare me!" murmured the wretched lady, imploringly, as she stopped short and seemed sinking to the ground. "I can not—will not approach that grave!"

"Then, by heaven! you shall sleep in it yourself, along with your lover!" replied her companion, seizing her by the arm and shaking her with a ruffian violence.

"What! would you murder me?" she ejaculated, in gasping horror and agonising affright: and as she gazed up at her ruthless husband—for such indeed was her companion—the moonbeams fell upon her countenance, showing how terribly it was convulsed and distorted, all its beauty obliterated as it were for the moment.

"Come—no more of this nonsense—or you will put me into a rage and provoke me to do you a mischief," said her husband. "I swore that you should accompany me this night—and indeed, why should you not? 'Tis *your* work, not *mine*, that is being done: and you ought to be infinitely obliged to me for taking all this trouble to conceal for ever the traces of an occurrence that might readily be construed into a crime."

"I will accompany you," said the lady, in a tone of desperate resignation, as if the truth and justice of her husband's last speech had sunk profoundly into her soul. "Yes—I will accompany you through this tremendous ordeal, since you wish it——"

"Aye—and I command it," he observed, with that brutal ferocity which characterised his language and his conduct towards his wife, who, guilty though she might have been, yet deserved not the treatment which this coward ruffian was observing in regard to her.

"Be it so," she said, meekly: "you command—and I obey. Only, for God's sake—I conjure you—I implore you—speak less harshly to me—for I am miserable, very miserable, I can assure you!"

And she burst into an agony of weeping.

Her husband suffered her thus to pour forth the torrents of her ineffable affliction without breathing a word of solace or pardon. In sullen and inhuman reserve—in profound and cruel silence—he stood gazing upon her as she wept. At the expiration of two or three minutes she became calmer: her grief had found a vent—her surcharged bosom was relieved—and taking her husband's arm once more, she suffered him to lead her forward to the spot where the light was still remaining stationary in its sinister dimness.

Concealed amongst a group of trees, and with a lantern placed upon the ground, a man was digging a grave. On hearing footsteps approach, he desisted from his work; and, leaning upon his shovel as he stood in the pit which he was making, his head and shoulders only were visible as he looked in the direction of those persons who were advancing. The dim rays of the lantern shone mistily upon his countenance—but enough to reveal its ghastly repulsiveness and diabolical expression to the eyes of the lady as she tremblingly clung to the arms of her husband.

"O God! what a hideous-looking man!" she murmured, in a rapid whisper to herself rather than to her companion: and she held back in terror, as if it were a corpse that was gazing out of the grave at her.

"Hold your tongue, you fool," growled her husband, savagely: "he is an excellent fellow—and I don't know what the devil I should have done without him. Well," he exclaimed aloud, addressing himself to the man, as he dragged rather than led his unfortunate wife nearer to the grave,—"hard at work, eh?"

"I've been here these two hours," replied the man; "and you see I have made pretty good progress. You told me it was to be deep ——"

"Yes: we don't want the corpse to be easily raked up by the first gardener who comes to work in the place," said the gentleman, with a chuckle which sounded horribly upon his wife's ears. "My

lease is up on quarter-day—and I dare say the place will soon let again, even if there be not a new tenant ready to come in on Michaelmas day, which is next week. So it was necessary to lose no time ——"

"Aye, aye—I understand," observed the man in the grave. "You had better lose no time either in talking, sir: and if the pit is deep enough ——"

"Quite deep enough," said the gentleman. "I and my wife will go up and get the corpse out of its hiding-place ——"

"And I'll be with you in a few minutes to help you down with it," interrupted the man,—"directly I've shovelled up the loose dirt at the bottom."

"Very good," returned the gentleman: and he led his wife away from the grave, where she had been standing in a state of mind that can be more readily conceived than depicted.

They now hastened towards the house which was only a few yards distant; and the gentleman opened the back door by means of a key which he had about him. He then passed into the kitchen, followed by his wife; and, having lighted a candle, he led the way up-stairs.

Not a word was spoken: the dead silence of the hour and place was broken only by the footsteps of the husband—for those of his wife were noiseless. The unhappy lady was pale as death: but her features were calm—calm even to immobility. She had now concentrated all her energies to face a fearful scene and pass through a tremendous ordeal: her mental powers were all collected at one point—and she felt that with a single moment of yielding or weakness, the whole would give way. It was the courage of desperation that now armed her—the fortitude of one who has resolved to stretch every chord of the heart and strain every nerve of the brain in order to dare and endure the worst!

Her husband ascended the stairs with the candle in his hand—and she followed close behind him. Their lengthened shadows upon the wall and the desolate echo of his footsteps as they traversed the spacious hall, alarmed her for a moment: but she compressed her ashy lips tightly, to suppress the scream that was passing as it were behind them.

The house had been let to them ready furnished: and everything was in precisely the same state as when they left it some months previously. On leaving it at the time referred to, some domestics had remained in charge of the premises: but on reaching the Continent, the husband had immediately written over to discharge them, as he found that his means would not permit him to retain either them or the establishment. They had therefore left within a week after their master and mistress had themselves departed: but during the few days they had thus remained at the villa previously to receiving the written notice from abroad to quit their master's service, they had not discovered the *one* tremendous secret which this house contained!

The nature of that secret may haply be guessed by the intelligent reader: but we will resume the thread of our narrative in due course.

The husband and wife ascended the stairs leading to the first floor. They entered the bed-chamber—and thence the former passed at once and unhesitatingly into a bath-room adjoining. The unhappy lady felt as if her courage were giving way—as if her fortitude, strained as it was to so unnatural a degree of tension, must break down all on a sudden. She leant against the bed-post for support: she clung to it to save herself from falling. Her brain appeared to reel—her sight grew dim—scorpions were tearing at her heart: but an impatient word from her husband commanding her to follow him, struck upon her ear;—and gathering again all her energies that were so fast scattering, she advanced with slow steps—as if she were a corpse, moving stiffly—into the bath-room.

A faint and sickly odour—the unmistakable exhalation of the dead—assailed her nostrils: and now a wild, wordless, gurgling sound came from her lips — those lips that were instantaneously compressed again, to keep down any further emission of the horrible sensations that were harrowing her soul. Her eyes glared fixedly: but her cheeks remained pallid and colourless as if the skin were altogether unsusceptible of reflecting any vital tint.

The husband placed the candle upon the toilette-table—and then proceeded to raise the lid of the bath. The odour instantaneously became more powerful: but it was not that noxious smell which made the miserable woman reel as if suddenly struck by a hammer—it was the convulsing violence of her own tremendously-excited feelings.

"My God! my God!" she murmured to herself, as she staggered against the wall after catching a glimpse of the object that lay within the bath.

And that object was a corpse!—the corpse of him whom she had loved so fondly and so well—the loathsome, decomposing remains of one who in his life-time was so handsome in person, so fascinating in manners, and so harmonious in voice.

"Come, now—help me out with this body!" said her husband, gruffly, as he drew forth a silken rope ladder from the interior of the bath and tossed it upon the floor.

"No—no—I cannot—I will not!" she shrieked forth in a rending tone: and then she wrung her hands in despair.

"You cannot—you will not?" exclaimed the gentleman, turning savagely round upon her. "By heaven, madam, if you talk thus to me, you shall sleep in the same grave with your paramour!"

"Oh! spare me—spare me!" she cried, joining her hand in piteous appeal. "Let the man help you to raise——"

"Perdition!" ejaculated her husband, furiously. "You want to throw all the work upon me, as if I had any hand in his death! Come, now—give me your assistance—or else——"

"Yes, yes—I will assist you!" she exclaimed, driven almost to frenzy with horror and alarm. "Do not hurt me—do not touch me," she cried, as his arm was raised to strike her,—"and I will obey you to the uttermost."

Then with reeling brain and throbbing heart, she took two or three desperate steps forward—leant over the side of the bath—and assisted her husband to lift out the body. As they were thus engaged, he turned upon her for a moment a look of fiendish satisfaction and diabolical triumph,—a look from which she averted her eyes in horror, as if from a loathsome reptile or a ghastly spectre suddenly springing up by her side.

At this moment the man who had been digging the grave entered the room;—and the lady's services were now dispensed with in the removal of the decomposing corpse of her paramour.

She took a sheet from the bed in the adjacent room, and threw it over the body—a proceeding to which her husband did not object, inasmuch as its flesh was too loathsome to make him at all anxious to touch it. He and the man then raised it between them, and bore their burden down the staircase, the lady following with the candle in one hand and the rope-ladder in the other. Into the garden was the corpse thus conveyed: it was lowered by means of the silken cords into the pit dug to receive it;—and then the man proceeded to throw in the mould which he had heaped up on either side of the unblest grave.

"You will be sure to lock the garden gate after you," said the gentleman, as he led his wife away from the spot.

"No fear of that, sir," was the reply of the man, as he went on shovelling in the earth: "and I'll give you the key next time we meet."

"That will do. Good night."

"Good night, sir. Good night, ma'am."

But the lady heard him not, as she moved mechanically away leaning upon her husband's arm. An awful consternation was upon her: she felt as if she were walking in a dream—or as if she had 'ust committed some tremendous crime which had steeped all her thoughts in a confused and bewildering numbness.

Presently the hackney-coach was reached: and on entering it, she threw herself back in the seat and burst into an agony of tears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STRATAGEMS OF A BOW STREET OFFICER.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning, when Mr. Lawrence Sampson, attired in his best clothes, knocked at the door of the Marquis of Leveson's

mansion in Albermarle Street; and upon mentioning his name, he was at once shown into an elegant breakfast-parlour where the nobleman was sipping his chocolate.

The Marquis was in no particularly good humour after the adventure of the preceding evening,—that adventure which had terminated in affording Venetia Trelawney so complete a triumph over him: but the appearance of Mr. Sampson suddenly cheered him somewhat—for he was instantaneously struck with a presentiment that the astute Bow Street officer had succeeded in the delicate enterprise entrusted to him.

"Well, what news, Mr. Sampson?" inquired the Marquis, hastily.

"Good, my lord," was the answer. "I have discovered the authors of the outrage."

"Then upon my soul you are indeed deserving of the reputation which you have gained!" cried the Marquis. "But sit down and tell me all about it."

"Would your lordship like to hear the course I adopted to ferret out this matter?" asked Larry, as he took a chair: "or shall I come to the point at once?"

"I am anxious to learn how you proceeded—very anxious," said the Marquis: "because if I had taken such a thing in hand, I should not have known how on earth to take even the initiative step—much less carry the affair to a successful issue."

"I can assure your lordship," said Larry, "that I have not only met with some singular adventures in following out this business, but have encountered such a danger that it is next to a miracle I should be here alive to tell your lordship all that occurred."

"Then do tell me, Mr. Sampson," exclaimed the nobleman, settling himself comfortably upon the sofa where he was half reclining. "I am just in a humour to require something exciting to cheer and interest me—something to divert my mind ——But of *that* no matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself as he was about to give utterance to the thoughts which were retrospecting to his adventure of the preceding evening with Miss Trelawney. "And now go on: I am all attention."

"Well, my lord," began Larry Sampson, "I must remind your lordship that it was last Tuesday morning you sent for me and told me of the outrage which had been perpetrated on his Royal Highness and yourself the night before. I must also beg your lordship to recollect that the particulars you gave me relative to the extraordinary adventure of his Royal Highness with the lady, were meagre enough——"

"Because the Prince had only described the apartment very minutely to me, without giving me an equally detailed description of the lady herself whom he saw therein," exclaimed the nobleman. "Nevertheless," he added, "I was enabled to tell you, from the little the Prince *did* explain to me upon this point, that she was extremely beautiful—with light brown hair—dark eyes—and a fine shape. But now go on—and I will endeavour to interrupt you as little as possible."

"From the manner in which the outrage was perpetrated and the ample preparations evidently made for its execution on that particular night," resumed Larry Sampson, "I felt convinced that it was a *put up* affair. This means, my lord, that the desperadoes must have received some positive information beforehand to the effect that the Prince was to visit Mrs. Owen's house that night: and therefore I came to the very natural conclusion that some one in that lady's establishment was in league with the rascals. So, after I left your lordship last Tuesday morning, I went and disguised myself as a knife-grinder—blacked my face in such a way that my own mother, if alive, could not possibly have recognised me—and made myself up, as it were, in such capital style that no disguise out of the many I have at times assumed was ever more complete. I got a regular knife-grinding machine, with tinkering apparatus to boot: and knowing that knife-grinders must be jacks of all trades and mend keys, locks, and umbrellas, I made all necessary preparations. In fact, as I can mend a key about as well as I can talk Chinese or Hebrew—which is, not at all—I filled a drawer in the rattle-trap machine with keys of all sorts, sizes, and descriptions. Thus provided at all points, I took my way to Richmond, determined to insinuate myself somehow or another into conversation with Mrs. Owen's servants. For there's no pretence so good as that of an itinerant knife-grinder to go round to the back doors of houses and draw the domestics into a chat—that is to say, in country places. It would not do in London, where there are scarcely any back doors, or where the servants answer one from the areas: but in the country it is quite otherwise. Well, my lord, it was on Tuesday evening that I entered Richmond disguised as a knife-grinder, and wheeling the moveable shop before me. I adopted the usual slang of the class—spoke wretched English—and played my part, I flatter myself, to perfection. I succeeded even better than I had expected: for when I got opposite Mrs. Owen's mansion, who should come out but her livery-servant. He and I immediately got into conversation; and I saw in a moment by something in the fellow's looks that he was a precious rascal."

"What! John—Mrs. Owen's footman?" exclaimed the Marquis. "Well, upon my soul, Mr. Sampson, I should not have thought it!"

"I dare say not, my lord," observed the Bow Street officer, in his quiet way. "Your lordship is not accustomed to look so keenly and so closely at people as I am. There's no mask a man puts on that I can't see through. But the evil opinion I formed of John the footman the instant I set eyes upon him was speedily confirmed by what he said——"

"And he is the scoundrel who is in league with the ruffians, then?" exclaimed the Marquis.

"Your lordship shall know all about it in a moment," said Larry.

"Well, continue after your own fashion," observed the nobleman. "I will endeavour not to interrupt you any more:"—and he again settled himself quietly upon the sofa.

"The footman, my lord," continued Larry Sampson, "speedily engaged me in a conversation which showed me what he was, but which I need not detail to your lordship, because it refers to some other matter that I must still keep a sharp eye upon. In a word, I became convinced that John was in league with the authors of the outrage perpetrated towards the Prince Regent and your

lordship. But still I was resolved to know more of my man; and I accordingly got out of him which public-house he frequented. For I thought to myself, '*You'll be going there, perhaps, presently: and I may as well watch your proceedings a little farther while I am about it.*'—So I went to the head-constable of Richmond, who is a friend of mine; and there I speedily transmogrified myself again. I washed off the soot and black—dressed myself in a peasant's garb—painted my face to have the florid look of country-people—and put on a wig of light hair that resembled a piece of a new door-mat. Thus disguised, I went back to the *King's Arms* (where I had previously taken a glass of ale on passing along just to keep up appearances in case John should inquire whether a knife-grinder had been there). Taking my seat in the tap-room and calling for some refreshments, I waited patiently to see what would turn up. Presently in came a fellow who holds a sort of official situation in the City—not a very creditable or enviable one either—in plain terms, the Hangman, Daniel Coffin: and I thought to myself that the plot was thickening—for I had long suspected Coffin of being a thorough-paced villain and secretly connected with thieves and burglars, although I had never been able to bring anything regularly home to him. Well, my lord, in a short time who should walk in but John the footman? He looked at me suspiciously for a moment; but I could have defied him to recognise me, inasmuch as the Hangman, who was waiting for him, and who knows me as well as I know him, had failed to discover me through my disguise. They talked in a low tone: but my ears are as keen as my eyes are sharp—and I heard enough to convince me that John *was* in league with the desperadoes to a certain extent, and that Daniel the Hangman was one of them."

"Now that you mention the name of *Daniel*," ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, "I recollect that one of the scoundrels was so addressed by the chief of the gang. In fact this Daniel was sent to get a sheet of paper to wrap up the pocket-book in the manner I described to you on Tuesday morning. But to think that I have been in company with the Public Executioner!" exclaimed the Marquis, his aristocratic pride horribly offended and his exquisite sense of refinement deeply disgusted.

"Well, my lord, these things will happen in life," observed Larry Sampson, quietly. "But to continue my narrative, I must state that finding the Hangman and the footman getting confidential and communicative with each other, I pretended to be asleep; and then they talked more unreservedly, planning a new crime and mentioning the name of a certain old Jeremy, a notorious receiver of stolen goods and melter of plate. To be brief, I obtained a pretty insight into the characters of those two worthies; and when they were gone, I also took my departure. I now saw that I was on the right scent in the investigation of your lordship's affair: and I deliberated what I should do next—because the affair was a delicate one, inasmuch as your lordship required it to be sifted without any noise and in a very quiet manner. All day Wednesday as your lordship is aware, I was standing opposite your house disguised as a beggar: but nothing came of that stratagem—my services were useless, as your lordship's valet did not give the signal which was to inform me that any particular person was to be followed. Well, at midnight precisely I went away. Hastening home, I speedily resumed my disguise as a knife-grinder; and off I sped to Jacob's Island—a horrible place in Bermondsey—where I knew that there was a den of resort for all kinds of infamous characters. I was likewise aware that it was the night for old Jeremy to visit the house to transact his business; and I thought it not improbable that the Hangman would be there to speak to him concerning that *other* crime which he and the livery-servant had planned at the *King's Arms*, Richmond. At all events I fancied I might learn something of use to me in the matters I had in hand; and relying upon the excellence of my disguise, I went boldly into the lion's den. It was a little past one on Wednesday night—or rather on Thursday morning, when I got there; and knowing how to patter flash—which means, my lord, to talk the slang language—I was enabled to pass myself off as a regular desperate character. My pretext for the visit was a desire to see old Jeremy; and to him I told some tale of an intended robbery and a large booty in anticipation, which quite won the ancient villain's heart. Presently the Hangman came sure enough; and to him I repeated the same story, enlisting him as an accomplice in the pretended crime that was as yet in embryo. From the rascals assembled at the den I subsequently succeeded in gleaning a little useful intelligence relative to the proceedings of some notorious dealers in spurious coin: but not a word was spoken concerning the outrage of Monday night. Of course I could not broach the subject; and I was thinking of taking my departure when a young lady was inveigled into the house. She had money and jewels about her—and the rascals proposed to murder her. The assassination being determined upon, I proposed to do the deed myself ——"

"What on earth was that for, Mr. Sampson?" inquired the Marquis, in amazement.

"Because it was the only way to prevent some one else from doing the job in reality," responded Larry, in his wonted imperturbable manner. "I was accordingly deputed to murder the young lady—and I went into the room where she was sleeping. Of course I immediately helped her to escape: but I suppose the noise of opening the shutter or helping her out of the window, reached the ears of the villains—and, suspecting something, they forced open the chamber-door, rushing in after us. To be brief, the young lady got safe off, while I fell down and was stunned by the blow. What now followed I can only conjecture: but I suppose that the ruffians determined upon murdering me—for when I came to my senses, I was plunged into the ditch behind the house. The tide was flowing in from the Thames at the moment—and to this circumstance do I owe my salvation. The current swept me along with tremendous violence: but I caught the supporters of a bridge—lifted myself out of the water—and was thus saved."

"Good heavens, Mr. Sampson, what a peril you escaped!" cried the Marquis of Leveson, shuddering at the bare thought of the horrible situation which the Bow Street officer nevertheless treated with remarkable coolness.

"Well, my lord, it might have been fatal," he said: "but as it was not, there is no use in fright-

ening oneself at what is past. Having got safe on firm ground, I went to a friend's house hard by—cleaned myself—borrowed fresh apparel of him—and sent him out in the interval to ascertain, if possible, what had become of the young lady. He speedily returned with the pleasing intelligence that some men engaged at a wharf had taken her under their protection and no doubt conducted her to a place of safety. In fact, he happened to make his inquiries at the very wharf where the comrades of those men were engaged. I then went home—got some breakfast—changed my attire again—and set off into the City, with the determination of visiting the Hangman's shop: for he is a barber, my lord."

"And what did you go thither for?" inquired the nobleman.

"To ascertain whether the ruffians had found out at Jacob's Island who the knife-grinder really was," responded Larry Sampson: "for I knew not what had taken place while I was remaining senseless through the effects of the fall outside the window. It was accordingly about nine o'clock on Thursday morning when I entered Mr. Daniel Coffin's shop; and I immediately saw by his manner that so far from suspecting *me* in any way, he was dreadfully afraid I suspected *him*. '*So*,' thought I, '*it is all right; and the villains did not discover Larry Sampson in the disguise of the knife-grinder.*'—Thus satisfied on that point, I went into the shop and sate down to be shaved, thinking that if I got the fellow into conversation something might turn up of use to me. In fact, my lord, I never suffer an opportunity of that kind to escape me; and it is strange how the most trivial incidents lead to the most important results in pursuing my avocations at times. So it was in this case. One of Coffin's apprentices—or rather, a lad who was living with him—struck me as being a youth whom I might model to my purposes: and after some discourse, I invited him home with me. But while left alone in the shop for a minute I picked up a bit of paper which had writing on it; and instantaneously perceiving that it was a part of a letter referring to the very business which I had in hand—namely, the sifting of the affair of Monday night—I put it into my pocket. Here it is—and I will read it to your lordship."

Larry Sampson accordingly produced the scrap of paper, and read the following lines:—

"*Paris, September 6th*, 1814.

"Since you have got a sufficient number of men to do the thing, it may as well be done without delay. But remember that no one besides yourself is to know the real object of the business: let your confederates believe that its motive is purely one of extortion or plunder. You say that the Prince invariably visits Richmond once or twice a week, and that one of these visits will furnish the best opportunity. Be it so. But be sure that you can rely upon the footman of whom you speak. He shall have the twenty guineas—half paid beforehand, and the other half when the thing is done. Mind and take your measures as securely and secretly as possible. I shall be over in London for certain, with my wife, on the 10th. Meantime you must attend to the following instructions. The house * * * * * * * * *

The fragment of the letter contained no more; and Larry Sampson, consigning it back again to his waistcoat pocket, proceeded with his narrative in the following manner:—

"Well, my lord, I took Coffin's apprentice home with me, and began by regaling him in the handsomest style possible with my means and humble household. There is nothing like giving an Englishman plenty of good eating and drinking in order to open his heart. An Englishman *after* a good meal is quite a different being from an Englishman *before* one. Nor did Jack the Foundling—such is the youth's name—prove an exception to the rule. I insinuated myself into his confidence—held out hopes and promises to him—and gradually brought his ideas and reflections round into the channel that suited my purposes. Not but that I intend to fulfil all the promises I *did* make the unfortunate youth; and I shall render him serviceable in uprooting the infamous gang whose head-quarters are in Jacob's Island. Yesterday morning, my lord, I had a long and serious conversation with the Foundling; and I succeeded in wheedling out of him the secret that the house to which the Prince Regent and your lordship was taken on Monday night was Beechey Manor at Wandsworth."

"Beechey Manor!" echoed Lord Leveson, starting with amazement. "What? is it possible that the General——"

"He very likely had nothing to do with the outrage, my lord," interrupted Larry Sampson. "Indeed, it is most probable that he little knew the purpose for which he was lending his house to certain people——"

"I believe he is on the continent," cried the Marquis;—"run away for debt, I fancy?"

"Just so, my lord," returned Larry. "Well having thus got at a knowledge of the place to which his Royal Highness and your lordship were taken so mysteriously, it was comparatively plain sailing in carrying out the investigation. The next thing to be done was to go to the Manor—inquire who were there—and endeavour to obtain an interview with the occupants, if they were still on the premises. It was also desirable, if possible, to procure some means of identifying the handwriting of the scrap of paper with that of any party whom I might chance to find at the Manor. Well, my lord, I forthwith assumed another disguise: and this time it was a postman's. Away I sped to the vicinage of Wandsworth, and soon ascertained that a gentleman and lady calling themselves Bradshaw, had been staying about a week at the Manor and were still there. I learnt also that the lady was young and beautiful, and seldom went out: and I likewise discovered that they had been in France. Convinced that I was upon the right scent, I continued my way to the Manor. There was the gateway into which the carriage was introduced, as your lordship described, last Monday night: there also was the side door! After some parley with an old domestic, I was introduced into the presence of a beautiful lady seated in an elegant drawing-room. This apartment was furnished just as the Prince described it to you, and as your lordship represented it in turn to me. It must have been the hall which was hung with the black cloth, and into which you were introduced on arriving at the Manor on the night in question. Well, my lord, the lady corresponded with the description—light brown hair, dark eyes, and a superb shape."

"Is she so wondrously handsome?" inquired the Marquis eagerly.

"She is indeed, my lord," returned Larry: "perfectly enchanting."

"Did you ever see a certain Miss Trelawney, who lives at Acacia Cottage, Knightsbridge?" asked the nobleman.

"I have, my lord," was the reply. "She has been pointed out to me in the park."

"And which of the two is the handsomer," demanded Lord Leveson: "Miss Trelawney or Mrs. Bradshaw?"

"I cannot pretend to be a very excellent judge of beauty, my lord," rejoined Mr. Sampson: "but I should say that Miss Trelawney is the best-looking of the two. Next to her, however, Mrs. Bradshaw—if such is really her name—is assuredly the handsomest woman I ever saw in all my life."

"Good!" observed the Marquis, complacently. "And now proceed."

"I have not much more to tell, my lord," resumed Larry: "only to state that I managed to wheedle Mrs. Bradshaw out of General Beechey's address in the handwriting of her husband—and that this handwriting exactly corresponds with that of the fragment of a note picked up at Daniel Coffin's."

"Then Mrs. Bradshaw is the gossamer lady, beyond all possibility of doubt?" exclaimed the Marquis, overjoyed at the idea and hope which he now cherished of possessing her.

"I have not a doubt of it, my lord," responded the Bow Street officer.

"But it is quite clear, then," observed the Marquis, "that her husband must have been a party to her dishonour last Monday night?"

"That is quite clear, my lord," answerd Larry. "The fragment of the letter proves as much. Indeed, the love-affair was evidently got up as a means to enable Mrs. Bradshaw to procure the Prince's signature to the document. That was the grand aim of the whole affair: but the assistants in the business were to be made believe that the object went no further than plunder. It is therefore certain that Mrs. Bradshaw's conduct with the Prince was instigated by her husband."

"Mr. Sampson," said the Marquis, "you have taken a vast amount of trouble in this matter—you have incurred great personal risks—and you have exhibited uncommon tact in prosecuting the inquiry. But I do not wish the slightest publicity given to the affair—neither does his Royal Highness."

"I understood this much, my lord, at the outset," observed Sampson.

"Do you intend to take proceedings for the attempt to murder you in Jacob's Island?" asked the nobleman.

"I do not, my lord," replied Sampson: "because if I did, it would more or less compel me to explain why I went thither in disguise—and such explanations could not be given without broaching the secret affair of the outrage on the Prince."

"That is just what I thought," said the Marquis.

"Moreover," continued Larry, "I shall be able to pay Master Daniel Coffin out in another way—most probably to-morrow night: and by the assistance of his lad, who is now with me, I shall in due time get the whole of the gang into my power. I presume your lordship has obtained no clue to the means whereby the pocket-book was returned so mysteriously?"

"Not a whit," exclaimed Leveson. "The mystery puzzles me sorely; and I do not see how it is ever to be unravelled."

"I must confess myself completely at fault in that respect," said Larry. "Your lordship's confidential valet is above suspicion?" he added, inquiringly.

"Perfectly so. In fact, I know not what to think," continued the Marquis. "The only persons who visited me on Wednesday were my nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish——"

"I saw him, my lord—a fine young nobleman as ever was."

"My niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart," continued the Marquis, frowning slightly at the compliment thus paid to his nephew.

"The lady who was so closely veiled, and who came in a hackney-coach, I believe?" observed Sampson.

"The same," replied the Marquis. "Then there was Miss Bathurst—and last of all, Mrs. Owen. I can swear that neither of these four could have had anything to do with the mysterious affair."

"Of course not," rejoined Sampson. "Well, we must leave the development of that mystery to time and chance. Has your lordship any farther commands?" inquired the Bow Street officer, rising to take his leave.

"None," said Lord Leveson: "only that you will accept this cheque for five hundred guineas," he added, tossing the slip of paper across the table.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson returned due acknowledgments for the bounty of the Marquis, and was about to take his departure, when recollecting something, he said, "I have to solicit that your lordship will give Mrs. Owen no information relative to the perfidy of her servant, inasmuch as I shall take that duty upon myself without delay."

"Be it so, Mr. Sampson," replied the nobleman.

The Bow Street officer then bowed and took his departure.

"Mrs. Bradshaw shall be mine!" exclaimed the Marquis, the instant the door closed behind Larry Sampson. "Her husband is either a venal or a desperate man—and she herself is no prude. Well, now that I hate Venetia Trelawney so thoroughly—so cordially—I abandon her to the Prince, and shall no doubt be enabled to console myself with Mrs. Bradshaw."

Thus musing, he rang the bell; and when the summons was answered by a page, he desired that his confidential valet might be sent to him immediately.

"Brockman," said the Marquis, when this individual made his appearance with a silver salver in his hand,—"go and tell Mrs. Gale that I desire to see her particularly in the course of the day—the sooner the better."

"Yes, my lord," answered Brockman. "This letter has just arrived," he added, handing his noble master the missive upon the silver tray.

He then withdrew—and the nobleman, who instantaneously perceived the royal arms upon the seal and recognised the handwriting of the Prince Regent, proceeded to open the letter. Its contents ran as follow:—

"*Saturday, September 21st*, 1814.

"My dear Leveson,

"In offering you the vacant Garter, I am only recognising the many services which you have rendered to your country and to the King's Government by your unvarying support of our blessed Constitution and those excellent institutions under which the British people are happy, prosperous, free, and contented.

"Accept, my dearest Leveson, the affectionate regards of your's, &c.,

"GEORGE, P. R."

A little slip of paper, which was enclosed inside this letter, had fallen upon the carpet. Lord Leveson picked it up, and read as follows:—

"You rogue, you thought to get the better of me with Venetia. But it served me right for forgetting to send you the special promise of the Garter. However, my dear friend, we will not entertain any ill-will towards each other: Venetia prefers *me* and has punished *you*—that is enough. By the bye, do you see by the papers that the rascally lower orders are getting more and more discontented every day, and are holding meetings all over the country? Something *must* and *shall* be done. Besides, trade really seems horribly bad; and the country never was *less* prosperous or happy. Our institutions positively seem as if they were worn out: but I suppose they will last my time. Any news of the gossamer lady?"

"Well, I shall have the Garter after all!" exclaimed Leveson, rubbing his hands gleefully. "And now that I am on the track of the beauteous Mrs. Bradshaw, the Prince may keep his Venetia in welcome"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SATURDAY: OR, THE SIXTH SUITOR.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon—and Venetia Trelawney was again seated alone in her drawing-room, evidently expecting a visitor.

She was plainly but well dressed, in a style calculated to show off her beauty to its greatest advantage, and at the same time to prove that she trusted to no adventitious aids for the embellishment of her charms. No ornament was upon her hair, which shone in its own natural glory with a splendour that far outvied that of the brightest crown or gemmed tiara. Her low-bodied dress displayed her fine bust; and in her looks there was a gentle tremulousness mingled with a soft and stealing languor.

Presently a loud double knock at the front door startled her, although it was expected; and the colour deepened upon her cheeks—and her bosom palpitated rapidly—and she experienced some difficulty in regaining her self-possession by the time her staid and serious-looking domestic announced "Mr. Sackville."

"Well, Horace," said Venetia, advancing to receive him with the cordial welcome of previously existing acquaintanceship, or even of positive friendship: "and so you have availed yourself of your turn to favour me with your presence?" she added, with a smile that revealed her pearly teeth.

"Oh! I claim the privilege of my day," he cried gaily, as he pressed her hand: then taking a seat near her as she placed herself on the sofa, he observed, "This is my Saturday, you know—and therefore I have a right to pay you my homage at your own house. Recollect that this is the first time I have ever set foot within the walls of Acacia Cottage."

"And what do you think of my residence, Horace?" inquired Venetia.

"That it fully justifies the description already given me concerning it," responded the young gentleman. "But tell me candidly—did you expect that I should call upon you to-day?—and are you angry with me for doing so?"

"I *did* expect you, Horace—and I am *not* angry," returned Venetia, in a low and somewhat serious tone.

"But of all the six suitors," observed Sackville, gazing upon her earnestly and anxiously, "I am the only one who dares not plead his suit and talk to you of love!"

"Do you wish to speak upon that topic, Horace?" inquired Miss Trelawney, with a slight agitation visible in her manner and a gentle tremulousness perceptible in her voice.

"Who can know you—who can contemplate you—who can hear you, Venetia," exclaimed Horace, rapturously and passionately, "without loving you?"

"But you, Horace—you, of all men, to address me in this style?" said Venetia, with a profound sigh: then instantaneously brightening up, she turned upon him her glowing looks, now full of an expression of archness, exclaiming, "You are only playing your part as one of my six suitors: but you are well aware of all that has taken place——"

"Of course I know all, Venetia," interrupted Sackville, gazing upon her with a profound and mournful tenderness: "and *now* I wish that it had been otherwise! But you have triumphed, Venetia—you have triumphed proudly and grandly—and the Prince of Wales may now kneel at your feet. Yes—your charms have achieved all that was anticipated: and I have been an accessory to the gaining of this triumph on your part. But I am unhappy, Venetia——"

"And wherefore should you be unhappy, Horace?" asked Miss Trelawney, in a tone and with a look that encouraged him to proceed.

"Do you wish me to tell you the real truth, Venetia?" he inquired, his handsome eyes glittering with suspense.

"Yes—if you please," she responded, nervously: and the colour came and went upon her cheeks, as if she knew full well the revelation he was about to make.

"Then hear the truth from my lips, Venetia," he said: and gazing anxiously upon her as if to catch the first indication of the effect which his words were about to produce, whatever this effect might be, he exclaimed, "Beautiful creature, I love and adore you."

Although Miss Trelawney was fully prepared for this avowal, yet when it was made she trembled all over—the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her cheeks—and her bosom rose and fell with heavings equally rapid. She endeavoured to murmur something: but the words died upon her lips—and a large tear, bright as a dew-drop and glistening as a gem, trickled adown each damask cheek.

"Oh! you are not offended with me—you are not angry!" exclaimed Horace, in a joyous tone. "I was determined to come to you to-day and breathe in your ears the secret of my adoration—an adoration which is however perhaps no secret to you!

For you may have observed that I loved you, Venetia—yes, you must have discovered it, despite all my efforts to veil my thoughts——But why do you weep?" he asked suddenly, and in a voice of the most melting tenderness.

"Because I am unworthy of a virtuous love," replied Venetia, a deep sob convulsing her bosom. "Though pure and chaste as on the day of my birth—so far as the world reckons purity and chastity—yet is not my soul already polluted? Have I not systematically and deliberately——"

"Oh! let us not talk of that, Venetia!" exclaimed Horace, with a species of shudder. "If my love be not offensive—unwelcome—unacceptable——"

"But you know, Horace," interrupted Miss Trelawney, suddenly wiping the tear-drops from her countenance and regaining her self-possession, if not her composure,—"you know that I have gone too far to retreat—that I have embarked in this enterprise—that my destiny is as it were fixed——"

"Oh! fulfil that destiny, then, by all means, since you will," cried Horace, with impassioned tone and vehement manner; "but do not disdain my love! Be what you will—do what you choose—accomplish all you have undertaken—but spare one little corner of your heart wherein my image may find a place!"

"You would hate and despise me when the first transports of this love of your's were over!" said Venetia, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

"No—that were impossible!" exclaimed Sackville, impetuously. "Listen to me, Venetia—charming Venetia," he continued, with a voice of earnest entreaty. "You will become the mistress of the Prince—but you need not love him—you cannot love him! I know your character and have studied your disposition too well, to believe for a moment that you will ever entertain the slightest affection for that man. But if you can love me, I shall be happy—oh! supremely happy: yes—even while you are the mistress of another! You said just now that I should hate and despise you after a time when the tempest of my passion had subsided or its ardour was cooled down: but its intenseness will never diminish. I loved you the first moment I saw you—I have loved you ever since—I love you now,—yes, love you to distraction: and so far from loving you less, I shall if possible love you more and more. But it is *you* who will hate and despise *me* for cherishing this love under such circumstances: and yet all I ask is to be your slave—to be allowed to love you—to receive your smiles in return! And if it should be possible for you to love me also—Oh! then I would accept any degradation—any humiliation, rather than surrender that love of your's. Yes—joyfully, joyfully would I become your husband, if you would bestow your hand upon me—so that your reputation should be saved in the eyes of the world——"

"Oh! Horace," exclaimed Venetia, taking his hand and gazing tenderly upon him,—"this devoted love of your's is a gift which no woman can refuse! But have you well reflected upon all that you now tell me?"

"Well reflected, Venetia!" cried Horace, carrying her hand rapturously to his lips: "it has been my constant thought by day and my dream by night! I tell you that if you were already the mistress of the Prince, I should esteem myself happy in possessing your love—and honoured in obtaining your hand. This love of mine may be an infatuation—a madness—a frenzy: but it is not the less powerful—less profound—or less sincere on that account. Nor will it ever diminish, Venetia—Oh! never, never!"

"I know not how to answer you, Horace—or what to say," observed Miss Trelawney, still leaving her hand locked in his own, but casting down her eyes and blushing deeply. "I will not deceive you by saying that I have loved you as yet: nor do I mean to flatter you vainly when I declare that you are the only being I have ever yet seen whom I feel that I *can* love."

"Thanks, my dearest—my adored Venetia, for this avowal!" exclaimed Horace, catching her in his arms and straining her to his breast: then, as he held her thus locked in his embrace, he pressed his lips to her's—and inspired by the natural fervour of her temperament, she gave back the warm and impassioned kiss which he imprinted there. "Heavens! Venetia," murmured the young man as he strained her again and again with passionate ardour to his breast, "I can scarcely believe in my own happiness!—it appears to me a delicious dream! But you will be mine, Venetia—you will become my wife?—yes, even under existing circumstances——"

"But have we no one to consult in this matter, Horace?" inquired Venetia, gently disengaging herself from his arms, with the deep crimson upon her cheeks and the soft sensuousness in her melting eyes.

"A consent will not be refused, my angel, in *that* quarter!" returned Sackville. "What does it signify, so long as the design and the undertaking be carried out? And I have already declared—indeed, I promise again—that although I become your husband, I will not attempt any constraint in *that* respect! Ah! Venetia, is not this a proof of the ardent and profoundly sincere affection with which you have inspired me?"

"It is," murmured the lady: "it is! But I am still fearful that when once I am your wife—that being whose honour the fond husband guards so jealously——"

"Venetia, listen to me once again," interrupted Sackville, seriously but impressively. "The world would never have known greater happiness than I should experience were you to say to me, '*Horace, I abandon this enterprise and I consent to become your wife, even though our marriage should suddenly deprive us both of the means of existence and plunge us into the direst poverty.*' Because, were you thus to address me, I should tell you in return that though utterly dependent now upon another, I would work from morning to night to maintain you in comfort, if not in luxury. But I do not ask you to make so great a sacrifice for my sake. I am contented—nay, supremely happy—in receiving you as my wife, even with the conditions which I need not name attached to our union! Therefore, dearest Venetia, I do all this with my eyes open: I accept that destiny which will become mine when I make you my wife;—and I would sooner encounter the jeers and scorn of the world, than resign your hand! You see, then, that I am decided—that my mind is made up: and now will you promise to become my bride?"

"I will," answered Venetia, in a tone that was

scarcely audible: and her head drooped upon his breast.

Oh! with what impassioned rapture did the infatuated young man take that charming head between both his hands and cover it with kisses! Then gently forcing Venetia to look up, he lavished a thousand caresses upon her polished brow—her glowing cheeks—her charming mouth: but to no farther freedoms did the demonstration of his passion extend—to no sensual license did those burning caresses lead! His hand sought not to invade the treasures of her bosom: 'twas sufficient for him then to feel the rich volume of either firm and snowy globe heaving against his chest;—and Venetia could not do otherwise than contrast the delicate devotion of Horace Sackville with the frenzied longings and undisguised sensuousness of the Prince Regent.

For a long time did Miss Trelawney and her sixth suitor remain in tender and interesting discourse together. They talked upon many subjects—they reviewed all the circumstances under which they had first become acquainted with each other—they laid plans for the future—and they arranged that their bridal should take place as early as convenient.

When they separated it was past six o'clock in the evening: and Captain Tash remarked to his man Robin at the *Green Dragon* opposite, as they saw Horace Sackville leave Acacia Cottage, "Well, that is the longest visit that any gentleman has yet paid to Miss Trelawney!"

CHAPTER XL.

MRS. GALE.

It was about four in the afternoon that an elderly female, of matron-like appearance and well-dressed, presented herself at Leveson Mansion in Albemarle Street. She was evidently known to the domestics: for the hall-porter instantaneously admitted her without a word, and a page at once conducted her into the room where the Marquis was seated.

She looked one of those respectable, motherly women whom children would love and in whom inexperienced, artless girls would place implicit confidence. There was something uncommonly good-tempered in her smile and benevolent in her gaze,—something exceedingly unpretending, frank, and honest in her manner. Her apparel was neatness itself; and its material as well as her general demeanour indicated a gentlewoman in easy circumstances.

But how appearances may be deceptive! This female, with the kind and motherly air—with the unassuming blandness of manner—and with the look of unimpeachable respectability, was none other than a vile procuress. Her name was Gale: she possessed a handsome and well-furnished house in Soho Square;—and in that establishment she had a perfect harem of beauties whom she had decoyed into her meshes, and whom she sold to the aristocratic voluptuaries and wealthy profligates of the West End. Beneath that suavity of manner which she had so long assumed that it had become a part of her nature, she concealed a diabolical disposition. There was no infamy—no wickedness of which she was not capable: her plots and intrigues had carried desolation and despair into many a respectable family, and had proved the ruin of many a lovely girl. She had long been wedded to iniquity itself: but now, being its widow, as it were, she lived by involving others in its maze. Her perseverance in carrying out any scheme which she herself initiated, or which might be entrusted to her, was only equalled by her avarice in making the most of it either in the form of profit or reward. She was well known to all the rakes, roués, and voluptuaries about town: she was also a go-between for married ladies who required the succour of such a person;—and she had heaped up riches by means of her manifold iniquities.

Such was the woman whom the Marquis of Leveson had sent for in the morning, and who now came in obedience to the summons of one of her best and oldest patrons.

"Sit down, Mrs. Gale," said his lordship; "and listen to me attentively. But first tell me whether you have time and inclination to embark in a little enterprise for me."

"I have always time at your lordship's service," was the bland response; "and every inclination to devote it to your lordship's purposes."

"I expected no less favourable an answer from you," observed the nobleman. "Listen, then. At Beechey Manor, near Wandsworth, reside a certain Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw. The husband is an elderly man; and I have every reason to believe him an unprincipled scoundrel, who has already once trafficked in his wife's charms. She is younger than he, and exceedingly beautiful. This Mrs. Bradshaw I am determined to possess. But inasmuch as her husband is an intriguing, desperate, reckless fellow, he is quite capable of selling me his wife first and bringing an action for damages afterwards. Such a proceeding I am therefore anxious to avoid. In fact, I would sooner abandon the enterprise than place myself in the power of this Bradshaw. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, my lord," replied Mrs. Gale. "I can easily negotiate the affair without mentioning your lordship's name; and if I succeed, the interview can take place at my house, where the lady need not know who your lordship is, unless indeed she is already personally acquainted with you."

"I do not think she is, Mrs. Gale," observed Leveson: "because I never knew any one by the name of Bradshaw. To be sure, the name may be an assumed one: but this is a risk I must run. At all events, if the husband be not informed who the nobleman is that employs you, he can never obtain direct and positive evidence upon the subject Besides, you need not say that you are employed by a nobleman at all."

"Of course not, my lord," rejoined Mrs. Gale: "for if the matter did ever go into a court of justice, all the barristers in the world would not get *aye* out of me if I chose to answer *nay*—and as for being put upon my oath, I should not value such nonsense a single straw."

"You speak like a very sensible and discreet woman, as you are, my dear Mrs. Gale," said the Marquis of Leveson. "And now as to financial matters. I will give this Mr. Bradshaw a thousand guineas:—five hundred to be paid when he hands his wife into a hackney-coach, where you will be seated to receive her—and the other five hundred

to be paid to the lady herself on arriving at your abode,—to which, by the bye, you will have to take care that he does not follow you."

"Leave all this to me to manage, my lord," said Mrs. Gale.

"As to your own recompense," continued the Marquis, "I shall not utter a word upon the subject now; because you can trust to my generosity——"

"Don't mention the thing, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Gale, appearing to be quite shocked. "It is a pleasure to serve your lordship in any way: and I shall do my best to succeed in this instance. Has your lordship any farther commands?"

"None, Mrs. Gale. But do not be in a hurry to depart. What news have you in your special sphere?—any particular scandal rife at the moment?"

"Nothing, my lord, that I am aware of," was the response.

"No charming importation from the country to Soho Square?" inquired the Marquis, significantly. "I know that you always have numerous watchful agents abroad, while you yourself are constantly on the look-out in London. By the bye, do you not recollect telling me some months ago of a charming creature whom you picked up in Grace-church Street?"

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed Mrs. Gale. "Ah! she was indeed a charming creature!—the loveliest angel that ever set foot in my house, I can assure your lordship. She had just been robbed of her purse when I met her in Grace-church Street, and was unable to return by the coach to Canterbury, or somewhere in Kent, whither she wanted to get back. Ah! she was indeed a splendid young woman!" added Mrs. Gale, in all the admiration of a loveliness which had left a deep impression upon her mind.

"What a loss I experienced, then?" exclaimed

the Marquis, in a tone of vexation. "But what has become of her? Who was the lucky dog——"

"Your lordship must not blame me for that loss which you thus deplore," observed the woman. "No sooner had I got the young lady safe at Soho Square, than I hurried off to Albemarle Street to report the circumstance: but your lordship, as you may remember, was ill in bed at the time ——"

"To be sure—to be sure," interrupted Leveson. "Ah! it was a great misfortune! But what became of her after all?"

"On leaving your lordship's abode, I recollected that there was another means of disposing of the young lady to advantage," continued Mrs. Gale: "and so I instantaneously availed myself of it. But I must not tell your lordship any more," she added, with one of her blandest smiles. "You know I never repeat tales out of school."

"Quite right, Mrs. Gale—quite right," exclaimed the Marquis. "If you chatted about others to me, I should expect you to chat about me to others. I like your discretion and applaud your prudence."

"There is one thing, however, my lord, which I don't mind mentioning and which regards another person," said Mrs. Gale: "and this is that the sneaking, unprincipled, dishonest fellow, Colonel Malpas, came and borrowed five hundred pounds of me six weeks ago—and I can't get a farthing back from him. I declared that I would expose him: and so now I have begun."

"It is too bad of him," observed the Marquis. "But this is not the only thing of a mean and shabby kind that I have heard about him within the last few days. He is evidently an unprincipled scoundrel—and I shall cut him. They say he has run through all his wife's fortune—the heiress of the retired butcher ——"

"Yes—and he and the Earl of Curzon are raising money together by all kinds of desperate means, I am told," added Mrs. Gale, who delighted in a bit of gossip, especially when it was mixed up with scandal. "At least, I hear that their joint bills and promissory notes are flying about in all directions in the City: and so I am afraid that I stand but a poor chance of getting back my five hundred pounds from Malpas. But I will lock him up in the Fleet or the Bench, before I have done with him."

"And is the Earl of Curzon really in difficulties?" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson.

"I tell your lordship what I have heard," answered Mrs. Gale. "In fact Malpas offered me a bill with the Earl's acceptance: but thinking it was only to gain time, I refused to take it."

"And yet Curzon received a good fortune with his wife," observed the Marquis. "By the bye, Mrs. Gale, she is a monstrous fine woman—a very fine woman! I can't exactly make her out. Sometimes I think she is all that is correct and even prudish—and at other times I have been led to form a contrary opinion. Have you ever seen her?"

"I have, my lord," was the reply. "She is a beautiful woman."

"And what is *your* opinion of her?" demanded the Marquis, emphatically.

"Oh! I really cannot say—I don't know," exclaimed Mrs. Gale: then, as the time-piece on the mantel struck five, she said, "I must be off. Indeed, I shall take a coach and ride over to Wandsworth at once. Perhaps I may see Mr. Bradshaw this evening. At all events I shall go and endeavour to obtain an immediate interview with him."

"Do so," observed the Marquis: "for I am fearful that he may leave the country, as he has very recently been living in France."

Mrs. Gale then took her departure; and seeking the nearest hackney-coach stand, she entered a vehicle and ordered the driver to take her to Wandsworth. On arriving in that vicinage at about seven o'clock, she inquired where Beechey Manor was situated; and on gaining the requisite information, she alighted from the coach at the *Blue Lion*. Her object was to make certain little inquiries of the landlord or landlady previous to repairing to the Manor: but upon putting the first question, she was informed that Mr. Bradshaw was at that very moment drinking brandy-and-water in the parlour of the public-house. She also learnt that he was alone there: and without any hesitation she at once entered the parlour, having ordered some slight refreshment.

Seating herself in the room, and sipping the negus which was supplied her, she surveyed Mr. Bradshaw from the corner of her eye, her proceedings in delicate matters of this kind being much regulated by the view she took of the individual's character, as she judged of it by her skill in reading the human physiognomy. She accordingly beheld in Mr. Bradshaw a man on whose features dissipation had left their unmistakable marks; and in the lines of his countenance and its general expression she saw the worst passions and most vicious inclinations plainly indicated. But while making this furtive survey, the impression gradually stole into her mind that she had seen those features before—where or when, however, she could not recollect.

"It is a beautiful evening, sir," she said at length, by way of opening a conversation.

"It is," remarked Bradshaw, who was smoking a cigar: then, as he began to contemplate the woman with some degree of attention, he observed, "Pardon me, ma'am—but your features certainly are not unknown to me."

"And now I think of it, sir," she exclaimed, "I am sure that I have seen *you* before."

"Why, surely you must be Mrs. Gale of Soho Square!" he cried, the recognition flashing to his mind with the vividness of lightning.

"I am, sir," she answered, inwardly rejoicing at being thus claimed as an acquaintance by one with whom it was so desirable to get upon an immediate footing of intimacy. "And you are Mr. Bradshaw——"

"Ah! how did you know that?" he inquired, eyeing her suspiciously for a moment.

"Simply because the landlady at the bar, when she desired me to step in here to take my refreshment, observed that there was no one in the parlour but Mr. Bradshaw of the Manor:"—and Mrs. Gale gave this reply with an air of the utmost sincerity.

"Oh! that was it," observed Bradshaw, perfectly satisfied. "I know very well that when I frequented your house in Soho Square some years ago, I never gave any name at all: but it is a long, long time since I saw you last."

"It must be, sir," replied Mrs. Gale: "because I have only a dim recollection of you. And yet I

did recollect you, though," she added with one of her bland smiles.

"Well—are you still carrying on the old game?" he asked, chuckling significantly: and then he continued to smoke his cigar.

"Just the same, sir—just the same," responded the woman. "I shall be glad to see you up in the Square: my house is greatly altered——"

"Quite a palace, I dare say?" observed Bradshaw, with a laugh,

"Well—it is a nice comfortable place, sir," she replied. "I have made a little money—and what is more, Mr. Bradshaw, I know how to keep it."

"I wish the deuce I did," he exclaimed, abruptly. "My pockets are so infernally leaky—and then I have got the habit of shaking my elbow——"

"Of what, sir?" cried Mrs. Gale, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Why, of gambling—rattling the dice-box, I mean," was the answer. "I don't mind telling you all this, because I look upon you as an old acquaintance. I am staying up at the Manor just for the present—but only for a few days, I think: and then I shall be off to France again. I have got my wife with me: but her company is somewhat of the dullest at times—and so I stepped down here to the *Blue Lion* in the hope of meeting some one to chat to in the parlour. I was however all alone till you dropped in. But, by the bye, what on earth are you doing in this part of the world at such an hour?"

"Well, Mr. Bradshaw," replied the woman, assuming a mysterious air of confidence, "since you are good enough to treat me as an old acquaintance, I must not make a stranger of you. The fact is, I am engaged on a little enterprise which, if it succeed, will put a few hundreds into my pocket, and a good many hundreds into the pocket of some lucky girl, if I can only find just what I want."

"And what do you want, in the devil's name?" demanded Bradshaw, his curiosity excited by the mysterious, or rather incomprehensible response which he had just received: besides, he was always interested in any matter where money formed a portion of the topic.

"Well, sir," continued Mrs. Gale, drawing her chair nearer to the one in which he was seated, "it is the strangest adventure in the whole world—and yet not the first of the sort, either, that I've known or been engaged in. The truth is, my best patron is an elderly gentleman—a little older than you may be, sir—begging pardon for the allusion: and he is a terrible rake—a terrible rake! Well, sir, he came to me this morning, and said that he was quite wearied of all the conquests he had recently made—the old fool! I could scarcely help laughing in his face—and yet he is a very good-looking man, considering his age—and enormously rich—in fact one of the richest commoners in England."

"Well—and what did he want with you?" inquired Bradshaw: "to find him some new beauty to tempt his sated appetite and please his palled fancy?"

"Just so," returned Mrs. Gale. "But she must be a lady—a perfect lady in manners and speech as well as in appearance—and of course very beautiful. In fact, with the exception of these stipulations, he left the affair for me to manage as I choose: and hearing of a lovely creature who was reported to live at Wandsworth, I have been to inquire about her. But I find she has left with her husband—and now I am at my wit's end. It would have been a thousand guineas in her pocket—and from all I have heard, she was not so prudish as to have rejected the offer."

"A thousand guineas!" echoed Bradshaw. "A hundred you mean?"

"I mean what I said, sir," replied the artful woman, already confident that success awaited her. "A thousand guineas will this old fool give—and yet I ought not to speak disrespectfully of him, for it would be worth a couple of hundred guineas to me if I succeeded. But where to search for such a being——"

"And do you mean to tell me that this simpleton, whoever he is, will toss his money away in such a manner?" inquired Bradshaw.

"Why, sir, he is worth a hundred thousand a year," returned Mrs. Gale: "and being a bachelor, devoted to pleasure, he cares not how much he spends upon the gratification of his whims and phantasies."

"Well, there are such fools in the world—plenty of them," observed Bradshaw: then, with some little hesitation, he said, "It is very singular—but I think I know a lady who for such an amount might be induced to overcome her scruples——"

"Ah! my dear sir, if you could only put me in the way of success in this instance, I should be so thankful!" exclaimed the woman. "The strictest secrecy may be relied upon, as a matter of course——"

"And about the payment of the money?" said Bradshaw, his voice dropping to a low confidential tone.

"Oh! in any way most agreeable," replied Mrs. Gale. "Suppose that I was to fetch the lady in a coach, I would hand over half the amount at once on my own responsibility: and the other half should be presented to herself by the gentleman at my house, where the interview must take place."

"Will you allow me to help in the management of this affair?" demanded Bradshaw: "and I promise you that the lady whom I will introduce to you shall even exceed your expectations in every point. Beautiful—of elegant manners—fascinating and seductive when she chooses—young and well formed——"

"My dear sir, if you can really manage this matter as you say," interrupted Mrs. Gale, apparently thrown into an ecstacy of delight, "I not only accept your services, but shall be infinitely obliged into the bargain."

"Then let us consider the compact made," said Bradshaw. "Let me see—this is Saturday evening: shall we say Monday night at eight or nine o'clock, whichever you choose?"

"In what neighbourhood must I be to receive the lady?" asked Mrs. Gale.

"Why, to tell you the truth," was the response, "she is a friend of my wife's—a married woman, mind—but her husband is absent—in France, I believe—and she has been a little gay, but quite privately and secretly——"

"All these particulars I do not seek to know," interrupted Mrs. Gale. "The gentleman for whom I am acting will not ask her name—although he may communicate his own, if he is pleased with her and desires to see her again. This, however, I

must leave to his discretion and fancy. In a word, then, where am I to be on Monday night to receive the fair one?"

"In the lane leading up to the Manor," returned Bradshaw. "You will come in a hackney-coach or private carriage——"

"A hackney-coach," was the answer: "and I will be in the lane punctually at eight o'clock."

The bargain of infamy was thus concluded; and Mrs. Gale took leave of her confederate in the loathsome compact.

But ere she issued from the house, she stepped into the bar-parlour; and putting a couple of guineas into the landlady's hand, she said, "You need not tell Mr. Bradshaw that I made any inquiries concerning him just now. I shall be this way again shortly—and if I find that you have held your tongue in that respect, I will make you an additional present."

The landlady gave the required promise with cheerful alacrity, not only for herself but likewise for her husband: and Mrs. Gale, returning to the hackney-coach, rode back to London, infinitely rejoiced at the comparative facility with which she had thus far accomplished her purpose.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE BURGLARY.

It was half-past ten on Sunday morning; and Mrs. Owen issued forth from her mansion at Richmond, ostensibly to proceed to church as usual. This was the first Sunday for a long, long time that she went out alone, her daughters having hitherto been her companions. The present occasion was also destined to be characterised by another exception to the previous rule: for instead of going to church at all, she struck into a bye-lane along which she proceeded some distance. At length she observed a man leaning against a stile that communicated with the meadows; and she hastened to accost him.

"You are Mr. Sampson, I presume?" said Mrs. Owen, inquiringly.

"That is my name, ma'am," responded the Bow Street officer. "I need not ask whether I have the honour of speaking to Mrs. Owen?"

"I am here in pursuance of a letter which I received from you yesterday," continued the lady. "In that communication you speak of the absolute necessity of seeing me alone—you named this place for the appointment—and I have come accordingly."

"I moreover told you in the letter, ma'am," observed Sampson, "that my object was to give you a certain warning and to aid you in defeating a robbery that is contemplated."

"Yes—and you likewise bade me place the seal of silence upon my lips," said Mrs. Owen; "and neither by word nor sign indicate that I suspected anything in the presence of my domestics. I have complied with your suggestions to the very letter."

"Now, ma'am, don't be alarmed at what I am going to tell you," resumed Larry; "because we shall not only frustrate the intended mischief, but also entrap the concoctors. In plain terms, your house is to be broken into to-night——"

"Ah! the plate!" cried Mrs. Owen, with a start. "I have always been more or less uneasy since it came into my keeping!" she added, in a musing tone, but speaking aloud.

"Yes, ma'am—the object of the villains *is* the plate of which you speak," said Larry. "I believe it has the royal arms upon it——"

"On every article," exclaimed Mrs. Owen: "and I am responsible for its safety! Indeed, I would not for worlds lose it: the strangest suspicions might attach to myself——"

"You shall not lose it, ma'am," interrupted the Bow Street officer, in a tone that was calm but full of confidence: "that is to say, if you will follow my instructions and entrust the affair to my management."

"Of course I shall do so, with cheerfulness and gratitude, Mr. Sampson," replied the lady. "But tell me all about this mysterious business."

"There is a desperate villain under your roof, ma'am," said the officer: "and that villain is none other than your footman."

"My footman!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, in astonishment. "Why, I had the best possible character with him from Lady Morthen——"

"It does not signify, ma'am," said Larry: "he is a villain—and in league with villains. Of *this* I am quite certain: but I need not trouble you with the details how I came to discover all these things. Persons in my sphere have strange ways of getting at strange knowledge. Let it be sufficient for you to learn that this night, at twelve o'clock, a burglary will be attempted in your house—a duplicate key has already been obtained for the safe containing the plate—and, in fact, everything is settled."

"But what do you propose to do, Mr. Sampson?" demanded Mrs. Owen, terribly frightened. "Had I not better send away all the plate at once?"

"No such thing, ma'am!" exclaimed Larry. "The villains must be caught in the act and surrendered up to justice. That is the only way to deal with them. You must really consent to be guided altogether by me——"

"I will, I will," said Mrs. Owen, trembling nervously. "The fact is, Mr. Sampson, the plate belongs to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, who is now on the Continent, as of course you well know. When she was going abroad, she was much pressed for money, and borrowed two thousand guineas of my friend, Lady Glenroy, with whom she left the plate as security. That is the real truth of the affair. But as Lady Glenroy was suddenly called to Scotland, to attend upon her husband who was taken ill at the family seat in the Highlands, she begged me to become the guardian of the plate, inasmuch as she could not possibly send it to her banker's without betraying the delicate nature of the transaction that originally consigned it to her hands. I have explained these circumstances to you, Mr. Sampson, to prove how sacred is the trust, and how seriously I should be compromised by the loss of such valuable property."

"The communication you have volunteered, ma'am," observed the officer, "shall be regarded as strictly confidential by me: and you need labour under no apprehension of the failure of the measures which I propose to adopt to save the plate from the villains who have their eye on it."

"And what are these measures?" inquired the lady, anxiously.

"I will explain myself, ma'am," returned the officer. "But first tell me at what o'clock your household usually retires for the night?"

"On a Sunday evening at half-past ten or eleven at the latest," was the answer.

"Very good, ma'am. Now, this evening please to make it half-past ten," continued Sampson; "and of course the footman will retire to his own chamber at the same time. This he will naturally do to avoid suspicion. But at eleven o'clock you must be kind enough to steal down from your apartment and open the door — either front or back, whichever there is the least chance of the fellow's overhearing——"

"The front let it be," said Mrs. Owen. "He sleeps at the back of the house."

"Well and good, ma'am: and then I and my men will creep into the dwelling—and you must hide us in some convenient place as near the pantry as possible. Let it be the cellar, if you like——"

"I understand," interrupted Mrs. Owen; "and everything you suggest shall be duly attended to."

"Then I have nothing more to say at present, ma'am," observed the Bow Street Officer.

They now separated—and Mrs. Owen went and called upon a female friend whom she was certain of finding at home, the lady being an invalid. In her company Mrs. Owen whiled away the time until she saw the people returning home from church; and then she retraced her way to her own dwelling. By this little stratagem on her part, the footman could entertain no suspicion that she herself had been otherwise employed than in the usual manner on the Sunday morning.

The hours passed — evening came: and the nearer the momentous period approached, the more nervous did Mrs. Owen feel. But she veiled her excited feelings under a look of perfect composure; and John the footman suspected nothing.

At half-past ten o'clock she rang the parlour-bell and ordered her maid to attend upon her. This was the signal for the retirement of the household to rest; and as Mrs. Owen was always in the habit of assuring herself that the doors were properly secured—especially since the royal plate had been entrusted to her care—she was always the last to withdraw for the night. She therefore had an opportunity of seeing that the footman ascended to his room as usual; and in order to lull him the more completely into a false security, she observed as he passed her in the hall, that she should require the carriage to be in readiness immediately after breakfast in the morning.

The footman made a suitable answer, and continued his way up-stairs, chuckling in his sleeve at what he supposed to be a proof of the utter absence of any suspicion on the part of his mistress. The coachman—the cook—the housemaid, also went up to their rooms; and then Mrs. Owen proceeded to her chamber, followed by her abigail. This dependant she however speedily dismissed for the night: and then, enveloping herself in a wrapper, she sate down to wait until eleven o'clock.

A train of no very pleasurable reflections now began to pass through her mind. She was beneath the same roof with a consummate villain who was already meditating one crime, and who probably would not scruple to commit a deed more heinous still if he had any reason to fancy that he was suspected or that his safety was endangered. Her own murder might even enter into the compass of his designs: the hour for the burglary might be earlier than Sampson imagined—it might have been altered by the conspirators—and while descending the stairs to admit the officers, she might meet the villains and become their victim. All these reflections traversed her imagination, till her very chamber appeared to be peopled with the objects of terror which she thus conjured up, and which thrust forth their phantom faces from every nook and corner, and from behind every curtain and article of furniture.

But all was still throughout the dwelling: and presently her watch informed her that it was eleven o'clock. Holding the taper in one hand and her shoes in another, she issued noiselessly forth from her chamber, and crept as silently down the stairs. The shadow upon the wall terrified her: every instant she looked shudderingly round, fearful of being struck by some murderous hand from behind her back. But her apprehensions were groundless: and opening the street door, she gave admission to Mr. Lawrence Sampson, who was closely followed by half-a-dozen of his subordinate constables.

An immense load was now suddenly lifted from Mrs. Owen's mind; and she felt as if she had all in a moment been transferred from a predicament of appalling peril to a state of complete security. The front-door was closed as noiselessly as it had been opened; and she conducted the officers down into the lower premises, where they ensconced themselves in a large closet underneath the kitchen-stairs, and used for keeping fire-wood. Mrs. Owen then retraced her steps with the utmost caution to her own chamber, which she succeeded in reaching unmolested: and, locking the door, she sat down to await the result of the adventure.

We will now direct the reader's attention to the footman, who was also sitting up and waiting in his own room at the top of the house. He had provided himself with a bottle of his mistress's wine, which he was drinking at his ease, little suspecting the trap that had been set to ensnare him. So noiselessly had Mrs. Owen's proceedings been conducted, and so carefully had the constables entered the mansion, that not the slightest sound of an unusual character reached the ears of John as he sate discussing the fine old Port in his attic.

Lulled into complete security, he thus passed the time until within a few minutes of twelve o'clock. He then rose from his seat—assured himself that he had the duplicate key safe in his pocket—and, carrying his shoes in his hand, gently stole down stairs. Pausing to listen at Mrs. Owen's door, he found that all was still: and, chuckling with the hope of a rich booty, he continued his way to the premises below. Lighting a candle,—for he had left his own in his room,—he put on his shoes and at once opened the door of the back kitchen. The Hangman immediately entered the place: the door was closed again;—and the two villains passed into the pantry adjoining.

"You don't think the old woman suspects anything?" inquired Coffin, in a subdued whisper.

"Not a bit of it, Dan'el," was the answer, given

in an equally low tone. "She told me as she went up to bed, that the carriage was to be ready immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning. But I fancy she'll be in no humour to go out riding—unless it is to Bow Street to lodge an information."

"Does she look every morning to see that the plate is safe, then?" asked Coffin.

"Very often—and generally at the beginning of the week. But come along—we won't waste time in chattering. Have you got the bag?"

"Yes—here it is," replied the Hangman, producing a sack from under his thick coat. "I've spoke to Old Jeremy, too—and he's to have his furnace blazing and his melting-pot ready at five in the morning: but I shall be with him long before that, I hope. Three hours are enough——"

"Are you going to pad it, then?" inquired John, as he put the key into the lock of the iron safe.

"To be sure—all across the fields," answered the Hangman. "You don't think I'd have a vehicle loitering about to excite suspicion. Not I indeed! But come—open that door—and let us catch a glimpse of the pretty things inside."

The footman accordingly opened the safe: but no sooner had the massive door grated on its hinges, when there was a sudden rush of several men through the back kitchen—and in the twinkling of an eye the pantry was invaded by the constables.

A terrible imprecation burst from the lips of the Hangman as he recognised Larry Sampson and his official posse: while a groan of horror indicated the feelings of the guilty footman.

"Take that, you scoundrel!" ejaculated Daniel Coffin, levelling a pistol at Sampson as this redoubtable officer seized upon the livery-servant.

But the ball, missing him for whom it was intended, shot the wretched footman through the heart: and with one wild cry, he sprang up and then fell dead at Sampson's feet.

Quick as lightning, and with the desperate strength of a giant, the Hangman burst away from the constables who seized upon him: and rushing forth from the pantry, he bounded through the back kitchen. The officers were at his heels in a moment: but he had just time to bang the door in their face and draw the bolt. Then darting up the stairs, he reached the front door of the house; and as he unchained it, he heard the officers break open the one which he had bolted down below. It was neck or nothing: but he threw open the front door—seized the key—locked it outside—and fled precipitately.

The three or four constables who had pursued him, hearing him lock the front door, rushed into the dining-room, tore open the shutters, raised the window, and dashed through it in chase of the fugitive. The night was clear: and they caught a glimpse of him as he turned out of the main road into the fields at a little distance. On they sped: again they beheld him—and two or three pistols were instantaneously discharged at him as he ran madly on. But his speed relaxed not: and the balls had evidently taken no effect. Another pistol was fired—then another: and still the Hangman pursued his desperate way, unhurt and unscathed by the winged bullets.

The pursuit now lay across a wide open field, sloping slightly towards the Thames; and a high hedge bounded it at the extremity in the direction of which the Hangman was flying. The constables were advancing diagonally across the field—so that if the fugitive should find the hedge impassable, his retreat would be effectually cut off. Another minute would, to all appearances, decide the matter.

With unrelaxing speed, but fearful pantings, Daniel Coffin skimmed over the meadow: and now the hedge was reached. He glanced behind him for an instant—and his pursuers were still fifty yards distant. He sprang upon the bank where the hedge grew—he looked over the thick barrier—and on the other side was a black ditch, evidently choked with mud, and too wide to enable him to leap it.

"Better be drowned than suffocated!" was the rapid thought which darted through the brain of the desperate man: and furiously he dashed towards the river.

The constables were almost instantaneously at his heels: that delay at the hedge had diminished the interval between the pursuers and the pursued.

"We have got him now!" cried one of the officers.

"No such thing—he's making for the Thames!" said another: then, raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Dan'el you fool, you'll be drowned!"

But scarcely was the terrible warning uttered—and while it was still ringing in the cold, crisp night-air—the Hangman plunged desperately into the river.

The next moment the constables were upon the bank of the Thames: but the tide was running strong with the ebb—and Daniel Coffin was already out of sight.

"There's an end of Jack Ketch!" exclaimed one of the constables, as they all fruitlessly strained their eyes to see if they could catch a glimpse of him appearing anywhere upon the surface of the river: for the hedge and the black ditch prevented them from hastening any farther along the bank.

"Yes—he's done for," observed another of the officers: and they then retraced their way to Mrs. Owen's mansion to report the catastrophe.

Meantime the entire household had been alarmed by the report of a pistol—the violent banging of the street-door—and the rush of the constables through the hall into the dining-room. Mrs. Owen was the first to descend: and in a few moments the coachman and the female domestics, all half-dressed, were hastening from their rooms to learn what had happened. The tale was soon told: an attempt at robbery—the flight of the burglar—and the death of his accomplice, John the footman!

The guilty wretch was indeed no more: it was evidently useless to summon medical assistance—for he was stone dead. There was some hysterical demonstration amongst the females—especially Mrs. Owen's lady's-maid, whom John had courted: but their terrors were dissipated when they found that all danger from the criminals was past, and that the Bow Street officers were in the house.

Soon afterwards the constables who had been in pursuit of Daniel Coffin, returned with an account of the result: and the impression naturally was that the villain had met his doom in the depths of the Thames.

"Unless," thought Larry Sampson to himself, "he should escape as providentially as I did from the ditch at the Folly Bridges: but that is scarcely probable!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

BEECHEY MANOR.

It was about two o'clock in the morning—a couple of hours afrer the burglarious attempt at Mrs. Owen's house—when Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw were aroused from their sleep at Beechey Manor, by a loud knocking at the front door.

"By Jove! there are the officers to take me!" cried Bradshaw, starting up in alarm: and springing from the bed, he hastened to huddle on some clothing as well as he could in the dark.

"But wherefore should you fear, since you possess that paper?" inquired his wife, who was nevertheless trembling and shivering with terror.

"Oh! because one always wants to put off an evil day as long as possible," returned her husband, impatiently. "This is cursed provoking—just as I have got a little business in hand, of which I meant to speak to you to-morrow——But there is the knocking again."

"What shall I do? Can you not escape?" asked Mrs. Bradshaw, anxiously.

"I'll try. Open the window—say I am not at home—gone to France—anything—only be quick—and I will hide myself somewhere. They are sure to search the house."

This dialogue scarcely occupied half a minute, during which the knocking was however continued impatiently; and as Mrs. Bradshaw opened the window, it struck her husband that the officers of justice would not present themselves with quite so much fracas—unless, indeed, they had surrounded the Manor, of which he was fearful. He however remained to hear what passed between his wife and whomsoever the person or persons might be that were knocking at the door.

"Who is there?" asked Mrs. Bradshaw, looking forth from the window: but the night—or rather morning—was now pitch dark, and she could distinguish nothing.

"Me—a friend of your's and your husband's," replied a voice, which seemed not altogether unknown to the lady: but still she could not identify it.

"Ah! I know who it is," exclaimed her husband, not so much at fault in this respect. "It's no officer. Here—stand out of the way—go to bed again—and leave me to manage the matter." Then, taking his wife's place at the window, he said to the person below, "Wait an instant—and I will come down."

Having thus spoken, he closed the window, struck a light, and quitted the room.

But Mrs. Bradshaw did not immediately return to the warm couch from which she had been startled. The incident filled her with vague and unknown alarms: and gently opening the chamber-door which her husband had closed behind him, she listened on the landing with suspended breath. She heard the front door open and her husband exchange a few hasty words with some man: but she could not catch a syllable of what they said. Neither was she yet able to recollect where she had heard the latter's voice before. The front-door was shut again—the man had entered the house—and Bradshaw was conducting him up-stairs.

What on earth could this mean? Trembling with a terror that increased upon her, the lady retreated into her chamber—closed the door cautiously—and got into bed. But still she listened attentively: and she heard her husband conduct the visitor into another bed-room on the same floor as her own. In a few moments he made his appearance with the candle in his hand—and she instantaneously perceived, as the light played flickeringly upon his countenance, that he was struggling to subdue or conceal emotions of annoyance and extreme dissatisfaction, although perhaps not of positive alarm.

"What is the matter? and who is he?" demanded Mrs. Bradshaw, anxiously.

"Oh! nothing—only a friend who has escaped from the Sheriff's officers," was the reply. "Where are the keys of the sideboard? He wants some brandy—being half dead with the cold."

"There—on the mantel," said Mrs. Bradshaw, very far from being satisfied with the answers she had received. "But who is this person? Do I know him? He said he was a friend of mine and your's—and his voice is familiar."

"To be sure—it's Jones—Mr. Jones—don't you recollect him?" exclaimed her husband, impatiently, as he took the keys from the mantel. "But I will tell you all about it presently:"—and he again hurried from the room.

Once more, too, did Mrs. Bradshaw get up and listen. But this time it was only at the chamber-door, which she did not dare open again, because her husband was moving about the house with the light in his hand. She heard him go into the dining-room: then he descended into the lower premises—and in a few minutes he came up-stairs again. A noise as of coals falling upon the landing, made her aware that he was going to light a fire in the room to which he had previously shown the visitor, and which he likewise now re-entered. He shut the door of that chamber behind him—and Mrs. Bradshaw went back to bed.

But she was still less satisfied and more alarmed than ever. Not for a moment did she believe the story of the escape from the Sheriff's officers: and she was confident that the name of *Jones* was a mere invention of the moment. There was some deep mystery—some disagreeable secret, in the knowledge of which she was evidently to be no participatrix. But what could it be?—what could it all mean? This unseasonable arrival at the Manor—the impatience of the summons for admission, as if the visiter well knew that his demand for an asylum would not be rejected—the attentions now shown him by Bradshaw, who was the last man in the world to allow himself to be put out of the way for anybody—and then the vexation and annoyance which were visibly depicted upon his countenance when he came to fetch the keys,—all these details constituted a mystery that filled the unhappy lady with the acutest alarms.

"O my God!" she murmured to herself, in the bitterness of her spirit and the darkness of her chamber: "to lead such a life as this, is one unvarying series of exquisite tortures! It maddens

me—my God! it maddens me! I will not endure it—I will not submit to it! No—by heaven! I will adopt some course——But, ah! that secret—that awful secret!"

And as if stricken with a mortal consternation by the effect of some appalling reminiscence, she suddenly stopped short in her musings and became still and motionless with despair. Even the very tide of her thoughts was frozen, congealing into all the horrors which at the moment filled them, and thus remaining present to her numbed imagination which could neither retreat from them nor outstrip them.

In this state she lay for a few minutes, until tears came to her relief and broke up the ice-bound stagnation of her soul. Then she gave free vent to her reflections again; and they soon flowed into the same channel as at first.

"Yes—I will do something to release myself from this horrible condition of existence," she murmured. "It will kill me—it is killing me already! To be dragged through the mire by the man whom I once loved so tenderly and for whose sake I sacrificed so much—O heaven! it is dreadful—dreadful! And this love of mine is rapidly turning to hate—it will soon become a longing for revenge! Yes—I will seek to emancipate myself from this abhorrent thraldom—I will even become the mistress of some one who will treat me kindly, rather than live as the wife of this man whose conduct is so brutal!"

Here the current of the unhappy lady's musings was broken by the return of her husband, who immediately extinguished the candle and lay down again by the side of his beauteous but afflicted wife.

"Now will you condescend to tell me what all this means?" she said, in a voice which indicated a firm resolve to ascertain the real truth and not be satisfied with mere evasions and palpable subterfuges.

"Well, haven't I already told you that it is my friend Mr. Jones, who is in some little trouble about debts and Sheriff's officers?" exclaimed Bradshaw, with brutal abruptness. "He was perished with cold—and so I was obliged to make him a fire to warm him, and get him hot brandy and water——"

"And where does this Mr. Jones live?" inquired the lady, with that gentle and subdued sarcasm in her voice that showed how utterly she discredited the tale that was thus told her.

"Somewhere in Pall Mall or St. James's Street, I forget which," returned Bradshaw: then, not choosing to perceive, or rather to notice his wife's ironical manner, inasmuch as it did not suit his purpose to pick a quarrel with her on the eve of broaching his infamous arrangement with Mrs. Gale, he said, "But we will talk more about the affair in the morning. You must be sleepy now——"

"Not at all," interrupted his wife.

"Well, I am then," he rejoined abruptly: and she did not dare speak another word.

They arose in the morning at the usual hour; and Bradshaw hurried into his dressing-room, evidently to avoid further explanations with his wife concerning the presence of the mysterious Mr. Jones at the Manor. On descending to the breakfast-parlour she inquired of her husband whether Mr. Jones purposed to join them at the repast but her voice was full of satire and her looks expressive of incredulity.

"Now I tell you what it is, madam," said Bradshaw, turning abruptly round upon her, so that she started as if fearful that he was about to strike her. "I don't like this bantering humour of your's—and I will not put up with it. The person in the house is a friend of mine: and he is in difficulties. If he chooses to call himself Jones, or Smith, or Robinson, or anything else, it is nothing to you. He will probably remain here a few days: but he will keep his own chamber—and therefore you need not expect any intrusion upon your privacy. I will attend upon him myself: and so there is an end of the matter."

"But is this just—is it generous?" exclaimed Mrs. Bradshaw, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "Am I to be compelled to live beneath the same roof with a person who does not even dare quit his apartment?—and can I believe that pecuniary difficulties alone force him thus to dwell in solitude and seclusion?"

"In one word, madam," demanded Bradshaw, fiercely, "do you want to quarrel with me? If so, speak out frankly—and we can soon ascertain who will get worst off in the conflict of open warfare," he added, with a diabolical significancy in his looks.

"Let us be at peace, then, for God's sake!" exclaimed the unhappy woman, recoiling in horror from the deep meaning expressed upon her husband's features.

Thus baffled, defeated, and crushed beneath the dark menaces conveyed in Bradshaw's looks and words, the afflicted lady took refuge in silence and resigned herself to endure for the present all the tyranny and cruelty of which he might choose to make her the victim. For not even her great beauty—the extraordinary seductiveness of her personal attractions—her musical voice and her imploring looks, had any influence to move the stony heart of that dreadful man. Again, however, did the resolve spring up in her mind to seek the first opportunity of emancipating herself from this wretched thraldom: and again did she feel that the hatred, which had already supplanted her love, was fast verging towards a longing for revenge.

So soon as she had prepared the breakfast, Bradshaw placed a cup of tea, some bread, butter, and cold meat, upon a small tray, which he carried up to Mr. Jones's chamber. During his temporary absence from the parlour, old Mrs. Underdown entered to bring a dish of broiled ham; and she inquired whether anybody had arrived at the Manor during the night. Mrs. Bradshaw gave some explanations to allay the old woman's curiosity; and soon after the latter had retired, Bradshaw came back to the parlour, where he sate down to eat his breakfast.

For some time a profound silence was maintained between the husband and the wife: but at last, so soon as the former had eaten and drunk as much as he cared for, he pushed away his plate, exclaiming, "Well, a plentiful meal puts a person in a good humour, notwithstanding all things."

His wife, who thoroughly understood her husband's character, saw that this observation was the prelude towards the revelation of some new scheme or design on his part: and she then recalled to recollection the remark he had made, when they were aroused at two in the morning, relative to a little business of which he purposed to speak to her. But she said nothing, although her curiosity was already excited.

"Do you know," continued Bradshaw, "I am thinking that it would be better for us to return to France—or go to Italy—rather than stay in this country?"

"I am wearied of the life I am leading here, as you may well imagine," said the lady, with a profound sigh. "Not a single soul to speak to—not an acquaintance or a friend to visit me—cooped up in this lonely, desolate house——"

"I know it all—I know it all," interrupted her husband: "and I am really sorry for you. Ah! you may look astonished—but I *am* sorry: because a handsome woman like you must feel this unpleasant position. Well, then, shall we go abroad once more?"

"Yes—I should prefer it," was the immediate response.

"But I can't think of leaving England with the money we now have at our disposal," continued Bradshaw.

"You have plenty," exclaimed his wife: "at least you ought to have."

"Well, I have got sixteen or seventeen hundred pounds," said Bradshaw. "But I must make it up three thousand—or else I won't move an inch till I do."

"And how do you propose to raise the difference?" asked his wife. "I see that you have some plan in your head—and you may as well explain it without farther circumlocution."

"But if you can assist me in it, will you do so?" inquired Bradshaw. "Come—say yes—be a good girl—and I take heaven to witness that I will never quarrel with you again, unless you provoke me first."

"How often have you said the same thing!" observed Mrs. Bradshaw, with another deep sigh. "But no matter! Tell me what project you have now in your mind—and I will give you my answer at once."

"You can get a thousand guineas if you like," said her husband, significantly, "before you are twenty-four hours older.

"And in what manner?" she demanded, the blood instantaneously gushing to her countenance, and not only mantling to her forehead, but also descending to her neck and bosom which the morning wrapper, negligently thrown on, revealed in all the luxuriance of its voluptuous fulness.

"You already seem amazed," observed Bradshaw, as he perceived that tell-tale glow. "But what on earth should you be vexed for? You gave yourself up to a certain individual for love—you did the same to another in order to procure that document for me—and you may as well do it once more, to a third person who will give you gold."

"And this, then," said the lady, the blush deepening upon her cheeks, her brow, and her neck, "is the scheme which you have devised to augment the amount at present in your hands?"

"I don't know any other way of procuring funds just at this moment," returned Bradshaw, curtly: "unless I go out upon the highway—or else rob a church," he added, with a brutal chuckle.

"And pray, sir," inquired the lady, still with an unnatural calmness, "how do you propose to replenish your purse when this amount has disappeared? Is it your intention always to live henceforth by the prostitution of your wife?"

"By Jove! it was not I who first made you go astray," exclaimed Bradshaw, hotly: "and since you did it for your own amusement, you ought not to be so squeamish when it is for our mutual profit. In plain terms," he continued, perceiving that the storm was about to burst, and hastening to anticipate its violence by getting up a counter-tempest on his own part,—"in plain terms, I ask you to do me this favour—it is the last time I will ever think of such a thing—and your compliance shall be the condition of eternal peace between us. If you refuse, then war—war to the knife—and I shall open the campaign by digging up the corpse——"

"Hush!—silence!—enough!" ejaculated Mrs. Bradshaw, hysterically: then covering her face with her hands, she threw herself back in the chair and remained for upwards of a minute buried in profound reflection.

But her husband had no pity—no remorse—no shame: no—not even when his look rested upon those fair white hands, with their long tapering fingers and their rosy pellucid nails—nor when he thought of the ravishing beauty of that face which those delicate hands now concealed—nor when his eyes wandered slowly over the fine proportions of that form whose luxuriant contours the negligent wrapper not only developed but partially exposed—nor when he beheld the exquisitely shaped foot that rested upon the ottoman, and the well-turned ankle which the drapery, slightly drawn up by his wife's attitude, left revealed. Her beauty moved him not: he was sated with it—and all he thought of, was how to render it a marketable commodity. Oh! the villany—the atrocity—the infamy of that man!

Slowly, at the expiration of a minute, did Mrs. Bradshaw remove her hands from her countenance: and now the colour had all fled from her cheeks—and her face was as pale as marble.

"How came you to hear of anything in the form of what you have proposed to me?" she inquired, in a low deep voice.

"I will be candid with you," returned Bradshaw: and he circumstantially related all the particulars of his interview with Mrs. Gale on the Saturday evening—embellishing his narrative so far, however, by drawing upon his fancy for a most flattering description of the gentleman by whom Mrs. Gale was employed, and whom he represented to be young, handsome as Apollo, rich as Crœsus, and generous as Timon ere this famous personage became a man-hater. Knowing full well the fervid temperament and sensual disposition of his wife, Bradshaw artfully drew a powerful description of the personal graces of the unknown gentleman—assuring her that Mrs. Gale had furnished him with all these particulars.

Mrs. Bradshaw listened attentively: but she was too profoundly unhappy for her imagination to be excited by this appeal to her voluptuous passions. She listened, however—and with an increasing interest too: for the thought grew stronger and stronger in her mind that if this gentleman were so liberal in disposition, so fascinating in manners, so engaging in person, and so fortunate in his pecuniary circumstances, it would be far better to become his loved and cherished mistress than drag on a life of wretchedness, suffering, and constant tribulation as the consort of Bradshaw. She pictured to herself the possibility of playing off the artillery of her fascinations and the witchery of her seductiveness in such a manner as to enthral the heart of this young and susceptible unknown; and she calculated that if she did thus succeed in her aim, a pension would readily compensate Mr. Bradshaw for her loss!

All these things did she revolve in her mind as her husband proceeded with his glowing description of the unknown gentleman: and when he had concluded, she said in a low voice, and with an appearance as if it cost her an immense effort to give her consent, "Be it as you desire: I will keep the appointment you have made for me!"

Bradshaw was delighted—and, with the disgustingly sycophantic coaxing and wheedling of such a disposition as his, he lavished the kindest expressions and the most tender promises upon his wife. But she paid little regard to him—and remained absorbed in her own reflections.

The day passed, Bradshaw keeping in-doors and spending some of the time with his friend Mr. Jones, who kept entirely to his chamber. When dinner was served in the parlour, Bradshaw took him up a tray as he had done in the morning with the breakfast: and the same attention was repeated at tea-time. Mrs. Bradshaw made no farther allusion to Mr. Jones: her thoughts were intent upon her hoped-for emancipation from her husband's tyranny;—and being sanguine in carrying out her views, she ceased to trouble herself about his affairs.

At length the hour drew near for the appointment with Mrs. Gale; and Mrs. Bradshaw, repairing to her chamber, took the utmost pains with her tollette. She was resolved to render herself as enchanting—as fascinating—as seductive as possible: she accordingly arranged her hair in the most becoming style, and chose a dress which displayed her charms to the greatest advantage. Although deriving but little succour from old Mrs. Underdown, who attended as her tire-woman, she managed to get through the details of this elabo-

rate toilette with complete success: and the parting look which she threw at herself in the mirror, brought a smile of triumph to her charming lips.

Having put on a cloak and bonnet, she descended to the parlour, where her husband was anxiously awaiting her. In order to flatter and put her into as good a humour as possible, he passed some high encomia upon her beauty—that beauty the enjoyment of which he was about to sell to another!

Issuing forth from the Manor, Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw proceeded along the lane, till they reached the spot where a hackney-coach was already waiting. Mrs. Gale was inside: but she descended, ostensibly for the purpose of paying all possible civility to the lady, but in reality to catch a glimpse of her countenance by the moon-light. Mrs. Bradshaw instantaneouly divined her intention, and threw back her veil. An ejaculation of joy burst from the woman's lips: and this expression of unfeigned satisfaction on her part struck deep into the lady's soul as a presage of success in the design which she had formed with regard to the gentleman she was about to meet.

"Mind and tell her that he is young and handsome—and leave the rest to chance," were the words which Bradshaw hurriedly whispered in Mrs. Gale's ears, as his wife ascended the steps of the vehicle.

The woman gave a nod of intelligence, and put a purse into the hand of Bradshaw, who felt by the touch that it contained notes and gold. Mrs. Gale then beckoned him away: and when he was a little distance up the lane, she entered the vehicle, which immediately drove away.

Some time elapsed before Mrs. Bradshaw could induce herself to open a conversation with the procuress seated by her side, and for whom she entertained an instinctive loathing: but at length she did volunteer some remark—and, the discourse being fairly entered upon, she put some questions relative to the gentleman she was about to meet. Mrs. Gale launched out into the most fervid eulogiums upon his elegant manners, his liberal disposition, and his handsome appearance: and she also expatiated upon his wealth and possessions. The subject of his age was not mentioned: but Mrs. Gale, when pressed relative to his name, positively declared that she was not at liberty to mention it. She however observed that he was unmarried, and volunteered a hint that no doubt the lady (for she affected not to know it was Mrs. Bradshaw herself) might establish a close intimacy with him if she should feel so inclined. This remark was not lost upon the frail fair one, who received it as another harbinger of success in the design which she had formed.

It was about half-past nine when the hackney-coach stopped at Mrs. Gale's house in Soho Square. Mrs. Bradshaw drew down her veil, and was immediately conducted by the woman into a handsomely-furnished chamber, where she laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and arranged her hair. Mrs. Gale, who was now able to contemplate her by a light more powerful than that of the moon, was perfectly astonished by her extreme beauty, and became lavish in her adulatory remarks. In fine, everything appeared to promise Mrs. Bradshaw a triumphant success; and, feeling as if she were already emancipated from the tyranny of her husband, she grew radiant with smiles and literally beaming with the transcendent light of her loveliness.

Mrs. Gale conducted her from the chamber, across the landing outside: and, throwing open the door of a splendid apartment opposite, requested her to enter. Mrs. Bradshaw accordingly advanced into the room—the door closed behind her—and an ejaculation of horror burst from her lips as she found herself in the presence of the Marquis of Leveson.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE UNCLE AND NIECE.

"ERNESTINA!" exclaimed the Marquis, staggering as if suddenly struck by a hammer: "in the name of heaven what brings you hither? Oh! I dare not—dare not think for a moment——And yet, my God! it must be so!"

The nobleman sank upon a seat—covered his face with his hands—and wept like a child. The whole truth was revealed to him all in a moment: it was his niece who had played the meretricious part with the Prince of Wales—his niece who was the heroine of the mystic adventure at Beechey Manor on the preceding Monday night—his niece who had deposited the pocket-book in the vase at his mansion on the memorable Wednesday! And now also it was his niece—his own beautiful, loved niece—the only being in the world that he really cared for—who had consented to sell her charms for gold, and who had come thither expecting to be received in the embrace of a paramour! Vile, profligate, and unprincipled as the Marquis of Leveson was, all these circumstances fell upon him with crushing and overwhelming force—striking him as it were blow upon blow, as every detail in the train of incidents developed itself in hurried succession to his understanding.

And Ernestina—the wretched, guilty, shame-stricken Ernestina,—Oh! never did Indian scalping knife—never did the torture of rack or slow fire, inflict such excruciating anguish as that which she now endured as she threw herself upon her knees at her uncle's feet, and burst into a flood of the bitterest weeping. And, Ah! if scalding tears could furrow the cheeks and sear the flesh, all her beauty would have been annihilated in a moment by those torrents that now rained hot as molten lead from the eyes which they almost blinded: and never did that superb bosom heave and fall so rapidly or so violently in the transports of love, as it now did in the tortures of immitigable anguish!

For some minutes did the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Ernestina Dysart thus give way to their afflictions: but when the violence of their feelings had partially subsided, they looked each other in the face with an exceeding mournfulness and a profound humiliation.

"This is no place for us to linger in, Ernestina," exclaimed the nobleman, suddenly remembering where they were: and starting up, he said, "Dry your tears—assume as composed a look as you can—and let not the woman of the house suspect that anything is amiss."

He then rang the bell; and Mrs. Gale herself answered the summons

"Send for a hackney-coach," said the Marquis: "this lady will accompany me home."

Mrs. Gale withdrew, but shortly returned bringing in Ernestina's bonnet and cloak: she also announced that the vehicle was in attendance. The Marquis then gave Ernestina his arm; and they departed together, leaving the procuress to wonder at the suddenness with which, as she supposed, the nobleman must have revealed his name and rank to the *soi disante* Mrs. Bradshaw.

Not a word was spoken by either the uncle or the niece as they proceeded in the hackney-coach to Albemarle Street—a distance occupying about a quarter of an hour. They both felt embarrassed in each other's company,—Ernestina, because she understood full well that her uncle must have guessed almost everything which she could have wished concealed from him—and the Marquis, because his character as a voluptuary was now completely unveiled to his niece.

On reaching Albemarle Street, he at once conducted her into the Crimson Drawing Room; and bidding her take off her bonnet and cloak, he said, "Ernestina, we must now have a long and serious conversation together."

The lady sate down—averted her head—and wiped away the tears which again trickled down her cheeks. The Marquis allowed her to weep for a short while, knowing that those tears would relieve her surcharged bosom: then placing himself near her, he took her hand and pressed it in token of forgiveness.

"I can already divine much—too much—of your unhappy history, Ernestina," he said, in a tone that was low and trembling: "and if I now ask you to enter into the fullest and completest explanations, it is not—you know it cannot be—with a view to give you unnecessary pain—but to see how far and in what way I can assist you. For that your husband is even ten thousand times a greater villain than I had ever suspected, is quite apparent—and I must release you from the diabolical tyranny which he has doubtless exercised over you."

"What explanations do you wish me to give, uncle?" cried Lady Ernestina Dysart, with a frenzied look. "You behold before you the most wretched—the most miserable—the most guilty of women! O my God! why does not the earth open and swallow me up?—why am I living to endure this ineffable shame—this fearful degradation?"

And she wrung her hands bitterly.

"You must compose and tranquillise yourself, Ernestina," said the Marquis, in a tone of gentle entreaty. "This is an hour of shame and degradation for us both. Oh! in what a place did we meet ere now!—and what a spectacle for our mutual contemplation! Think not, Ernestina, that I am disposed to blame you, however deep your guilt—however flagrant your frailty! I am not unmindful of the damning, humiliating, circumstance that it was my own artifice which enticed you to that house of infamy—though God knows how little I suspected whom I was destined to meet there!"

"But you are a man, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, sobbing bitterly: "and it is the privilege of your sex to do things without dishonour, which plunge poor unhappy woman into shame and infamy."

"We will not conjure up reflections which can only tend to embitter our present anguish all the more acutely," observed the Marquis of Leveson, in a voice of gentle remonstrance. "Rather let us attempt the task of mutual consolation: and I have already assured you that I am not prepared to blame my niece, if she will deal candidly and openly with her uncle."

"I will—I will," exclaimed Ernestina, snatching up his hand and kissing it. "But I can enter upon no detailed explanations at present," she continued in a hurried manner. "You must put what questions you will to me—and I promise to answer them candidly."

"Be it so, Ernestina," said the nobleman: then, after a brief pause, and with extreme embarrassment of manner,—for he could not but feel how delicate the topic was,—he observed, "Your husband forced you to abandon yourself to the Prince Regent?"

"He did," was the reply, accompanied by blushing cheeks and downcast looks. "Oh! you cannot conceive, my dear uncle, the cruelty—the tyranny—the base and cowardly treatment, which I have endured at the hands of that man! He has threatened to murder me—and I am confident that he is capable of putting his dreadful menace into execution when giving way to those fits of frantic rage and furious passion which seize upon him if thwarted or contradicted. It was positively to save my life that I consented to that supreme degradation!"

"And the nature of the document to which his Royal Highness affixed his signature?" said the Marquis of Leveson, inquiringly, as he gazed with profound compassion upon his afflicted niece.

"You are aware, my dear uncle," explained Ernestina, "that at the beginning of June my wretched husband killed the Honourable George Sefton in a duel fought across the dinner-table at Lord Herbert's; and you have of course seen by the newspapers that there was something unfair in the proceedings of this duel on Dysart's part. In fact, if he were placed upon his trial, there is every probability that he would be found guilty of *Murder*, or at all events of *Manslaughter*—and even in the latter case his punishment would be severe. Now, although he fled to the Continent from the immediate presence of the appalling danger, it does not suit his purposes to shut himself entirely out of England: and he consequently devised a scheme for neutralising the effects of that ordeal through which an arrest, a trial, and a condemnation would compel him sooner or later to pass. His project shows a fertility of invention as remarkable as his wickedness in executing it is infamous beyond all shame and loathsome beyond all abhorrence. In a few words, his object was so to combine and arrange his proceedings, that by making me the instrument and the tool of his purposes, he might obtain from the Prince Regent a paper that would ensure him a full pardon, whatever sentence should be eventually passed upon him by a tribunal of justice."

"Ah! I comprehend," exclaimed the Marquis. "What wondrous duplicity!—what an extraordinary proceeding! But tell me the actual contents of that document."

"They are to the effect that inasmuch as he, Paul Dysart, had discovered the existence of a criminal correspondence between his wife and the Prince Regent, he consented to hold his peace, abstain from any law-proceedings, and even award his forgiveness, on condition that the Prince Re-

gent made acknowledgment of his guilt in that document and also promised on his royal word to grant a free pardon to the said Paul Dysart, whatever sentence might be passed upon him by any tribunal on account of the duel with the Honourable George Sefton."

Such was the explanation given of the mysterious document by Lady Ernestina Dysart; and it was delivered in a low, tremulous voice, with much hesitation, and with deep blushes.

"And now tell me," said the Marquis of Leveson, "why the place into which his Royal Highness and myself were shown, was hung with black cloth——"

"Oh! that mystery is soon explained," cried Ernestina, gladly passing from the immediate and positive topic of her own shame and guilt. "About a year ago General Beechey's wife died at the Manor—and the funeral was conducted with the utmost pomp and ceremony. The hall and the staircase were hung with black cloth; and this mourning drapery was subsequently put aside in a closet. When Dysart and myself arrived at the Manor the other day, we found this drapery; and my husband immediately resolved to have it hung up again for the proceedings of last Monday night. His object in doing this was twofold. In the first place, it would so disguise the interior of the house as to prevent any future recognition of the scene where those proceedings were to be enacted, supposing that his Royal Highness should endeavour to find out by means of spies the exact dwelling to which he was taken: and in the second place, Dysart conceived that it would enhance the mystery of the whole affair, and produce a greater effect upon the mind of the Prince, so that no circumstance should be wanting to work upon his terrors on the one hand, while the task of subsequently playing upon his imagination was left to me. But you must understand, my dear uncle, it never was anticipated that *you* would be the Prince's companion on that occasion: nor was I made aware that such was the fact until afterwards. You may conceive how horrified were my feelings *then*, on learning not only that *you* had been made a victim of an outrage which must have filled you with alarm, but that Dysart himself had plundered you of your property and compelled you to surrender up your pocket-book for the purpose of subsequent ransom."

"Poor Ernestina!" exclaimed the nobleman. "Little did I amagine that your graceless husband was the chief of that gang of desperadoes. But as I had never previously spoken to Dysart in my life, I of course did not recognise his voice on that occasion. Then the next step, I suppose, was to compel you to visit me on the ensuing Wednesday—last Wednesday—to obtain the ransom-money for the pocket-book?"

"My husband menaced me in the most terrible manner," replied Ernestina, "and compelled me to do his will in that respect. He cared not how I conducted the delicate transaction so long as I succeeded in accomplishing it; and you may imagine the extent of my joy and gratitude when the appeal which I made to your bounty in this room was met by the gift of the very sum that I was bound to take back to my unprincipled husband. During your temporary absence from the apartment, I thrust the pocket-book into that vase," she continued, indicating the ornament with her delicate hand: "but had you proffered me less than the two thousand guineas which I was necessitated to take back to Dysart, I should have besought you to present me with that amount."

"How strangely is all the mystery unravelling itself!" cried the nobleman. "You cannot conceive my astonishment on discovering the pocket-book in that vase! Not for an instant did my suspicions settle upon you, Ernestina. Would to God that I had never been told otherwise, but the affair had remained enveloped in mystery!"

"Ah! now you hate—despise—and abhor me!" exclaimed Ernestina, bursting into tears. "Oh! I am miserable—most miserable!"

"Console yourself, my darling niece!" cried Lord Leveson, more affected than he had been for many, many years. "Had I done my duty towards you—had I compelled you to leave that villain Dysart and return home to me—all this would not have happened!"

"You have no cause for self-reproach, my dear uncle," said Lady Ernestina Dysart, wiping her eyes. "You have more than once besought me to leave him—you have a hundred times assured me that your dwelling was always my home whenever I might choose to make it so! But I have been infatuated with that man: and moreover——"

But she suddenly checked herself and stopped short in confusion and embarrassment, as she felt that her recollections were hurrying her upon most delicate ground.

"Ah! you have some other secret, which is as yet unexplained, Ernestina!" cried the Marquis, gazing intently upon her. "Tell me what is passing in your mind: tell me also how it is that Dysart has obtained such an extraordinary empire over you as to be able to push you onward into such courses as those which you have already detailed! Mere threats and menaces alone could not wield so despotic an influence over a mind so powerful as your's. Besides, you have long ceased to love Dysart—I know you have! It is impossible that you could continue a victim to that infatuation which first made you fling yourself away upon such a man. His treatment of you—his unprincipled character—his dissipated habits—and then that duel which almost stamped him as a murderer, must have crushed your affections and turned your love into loathing. There must consequently be some other cause for that power which he exercises over you? Come—be explicit, Ernestina: it is necessary that I should learn every circumstance, even the slightest, of that position in which you are placed—or else how shall I be able to extricate you completely from the toils in which Dysart has enmeshed you?"

"Every fresh explanation which I am now called upon to give," said Ernestina, her countenance once more becoming scarlet, "is only an addition to the tale of my own infamy. Know, then," she continued, in a voice that was scarcely audible, and with downcast looks, "that I loved another—I was criminal—and my husband detected me——"

"Enough, Ernestina!" ejaculated the Marquis. "I comprehend it all now!"

But he did *not*, however, understand the whole

truth of the dreadful affair to which his niece alluded: nor had she the courage to enlighten him fully on that head by an unreserved confession of the bath-room scene and its shocking results.

"The quarrel which took place between myself and my brother Algernon upwards of a year ago," she continued, "was caused by *his* discovery of my frailty. Yes—he beheld me one day walking with the object of my unlawful love—he observed our tender embraces—and he subsequently remonstrated with me upon the impropriety of my conduct. Hence our dispute—hence that fatal alienation of even the affections of my own brother from me!"

"We will not speak of *him*, Ernestina," said the Marquis, emphatically. "Let us now talk only of yourself. *Can* you and *will* you leave your husband?"

"But how am I to ensure myself against his persecutions in future?" asked the lady. "*If* I leave him abruptly, without mutual consent——"

"Are there any terms upon which he will consent?" inquired the nobleman.

"You are acquainted with his character, my dear uncle——"

"I comprehend you, Ernestina. Money—money—everything may be done with him by means of money. Tell him, then, that I will allow him a thousand a-year, on condition that he consents to a separation from you and that he retires to the Continent, where his income shall alone be payable."

"I will do so, my dear uncle," said Ernestina; "and no words can convey to you the deep sense of gratitude which I experience for this kindness on your part. To-morrow or next day I will come to you again and report Dysart's answer."

Ernestina then embraced Lord Leveson and took her departure, deeply affected with the interview.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE HUSBAND AND WIFE.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Ernestina arrived in a hackney-coach at Beechey Manor. Her husband had been sitting up carousing with his alleged friend Mr. Jones, although he was not thus waiting in expectation of his wife's return: on the contrary, he was much surprised on hearing her double knock at the front door. He answered the summons himself, Mr. and Mrs. Underdown having long previously retired to rest: and the moment Ernestina entered the hall, he said in a tone of greedy anxiety, "Well, is it all right?"

"Wretch!" muttered Ernestina, as she flung upon him a look of mingled scorn and hatred: and she immediately observed by his flushed countenance and the unsteady manner in which he held the candle, that he had been drinking deeply.

"What was that you said?" he demanded, brutally, uncertain whether he had heard aright.

She gave him no response: but snatching the light from his hand, proceeded into the dining-room, where she filled a tumbler with water, which she drank at a draught.

"Now, then," said Dysart—for we need no longer style him by his assumed name of Bradshaw,—"perhaps you will condescend to give me some account of your proceedings: unless you like to defer it until to-morrow morning——"

"As well now as at any other time," she exclaimed, with a demonstration of spirit so marked and unmistakable that her husband prepared himself for a scene.

"Well—and do you intend to pick a quarrel with me?" he demanded, fiercely.

"I care not whether I quarrel with you, or not," she replied. "You see before you a desperate woman——"

"Then I'll very soon knock your desperation out of you," exclaimed Dysart, staggering forward with clenched fist and upraised arm to strike her.

"Beware!" she cried, snatching up a knife from the table on which the supper-things still remained: then, stepping back, but brandishing the weapon, while her countenance was pale with rage, she said in a hoarse tone, "Dare to strike me, wretch, and I will plunge this knife into your heart—although I were to mount the scaffold to-morrow morning for the murder!"

"What the devil ails the woman?" exclaimed Dysart, shrinking back in terror: then, throwing himself upon a seat, he said, "I am prepared to listen to anything you may have to tell me."

"You are doubtless anxiously expecting me to place the other five hundred guineas in your hand," she observed, with a fierce bitterness in her tone and an implacable hatred in her looks: "but you will be disappointed—for I have returned without them."

"Then have you not seen the gentleman?" demanded Dysart.

"I have," she responded coldly.

"And did he cheat you?—or did you play the prude at the last moment?" inquired her husband, half starting from his chair, but sinking back into it the next instant as he saw that his wife was really nerved with an unusual spirit.

"The person whom I encountered in Soho Square," she said, still with that same freezing bitterness of voice, "was my own uncle, the Marquis of Leveson."

"By Jove! this is unfortunate," exclaimed Dysart, startled and almost astounded by the intelligence. "But of course you made some excuse—you declared it was all a mistake——"

"I did no such thing," interrupted Ernestina. "He took me home with him—and we had a long and serious conversation together. The result was that he is prepared to make you, through me, a certain proposition——"

"What is it?" demanded Dysart, abruptly.

"He will allow you a thousand guineas a-year on condition that you retire to the Continent, where the revenue thus afforded by his bounty can alone be received by you:"—and as Ernestina thus spoke, she fixed her eyes upon her husband with an expression which told him as eloquently as such speaking orbs could do, that her own mind was irrevocably made up to some settled project.

"And is there no other condition affixed to this splendid proposal on your uncle's part?" demanded Paul Dysart, who already more than suspected what was coming, and who gave utterance to those words with a savage irony.

"A separation between you and me," responded Ernestina, with icy calmness.

"Well, then, I won't consent to it," rejoined Dysart, doggedly. "I can't afford to part with you, my dear, on such cheap terms," he added, with a coarse chuckling laugh.

"But my resolution is unalterably taken," she said: "and I tell you once for all that I will live with you no longer. I confess that I was unfaithful to you—that I learnt to love another. But even if there had been no provocation on your side, my guilt has every extenuation in the awful punishment it has received. There *was*, however, all possible provocation on your part. You know how I once loved you—how completely wrapped up in you I was: and that fervid affection on my part only required to be cherished in order to last until the end. But instead of appreciating that illimitable love which I bestowed upon you—instead of recompensing me by your kindness for any sacrifice of fortune and position, wealth and comfort, which I made in becoming your wife—you treated me with cruelty, neglect, and indifference. Left for days and days alone—deserted by you from morning to night—was it singular that I yielded to temptation? You were not nigh to cheer me—to give me that moral strength which ever arises from a love that is reciprocated by its object: but you left me to solitude and loneliness—or else to the influence of that temptation. Ah! I can assure you that the siege which I sustained was long—my better feelings triumphed for months and months,—until in a moment when some flagrant neglect or downright cruelty on your part had left me weaker in mind than ever I was before—in that fatal moment, I say, did I succumb. But my punishment has been dreadful—dreadful: and now I am resolved to endure your despotism no longer."

"I have listened to this long speech," said Dysart, who was at first overawed and even dismayed by the terrible earnestness of his wife's tone, manner, and language,—"I have listened to this long speech with as much attention and patience as a juryman to an Old Bailey pleader: but I have nothing to say in answer to it. All I want you to understand is that I don't mean to part with you for a paltry thousand a-year. You are my wife—and if you leave me, I will ferret you out and bring you back. If you dare to take refuge in your uncle's house, I'll penetrate into its innermost recesses and drag you out. So there is my decision—and I'll write the same to the old fellow the first thing after breakfast in the morning. Now, then, let us go up to bed."

"Never again, Dysart," said Ernestina, emphatically, "shall you and I press the same couch. The incidents of the last few hours have made such an impression upon my mind, that I am resolved to leave you—I am determined to separate from you."

"You are mad!" ejaculated Dysart, furiously, as he started from his seat. "Dare to thwart me—and I'll dig up the dead body of your paramour and bring it into this very house to scare and horrify you into submission."

"Your menaces are vain and useless," said Ernestina: but her countenance grew ashy pale and her whole form trembled visibly beneath the blighting influence of that awful threat which had smitten her like a pestilence.

"Well, we shall see," exclaimed Dysart. "Now drop that knife—and follow me directly—or a death-struggle must ensue between us:"—and he advanced towards her.

"Keep off!" she cried in a frenzied tone: "I am not the mistress of my actions—I cannot control my rage—I am desperate!"

"Fool—mad woman!" muttered Dysart, returning to his seat. "Now let us reason quietly for a few minutes. You gave me a long speech just now—and it is but fair that you should hear one in return. Don't you think that, if you proclaim open war against me and get your precious old uncle to back you in it,—don't you think, I say, that I could tell a pretty story about you? Now, what are the facts?—you appear to have forgotten them. Last June we left England very suddenly and went to the Continent. On our arrival there we resolve to remain abroad some time, Paris being so much to our liking. We send over and dismiss all the servants from our villa at Blackheath. A few weeks afterwards, business compels me to come secretly over to London: and I leave you in Paris. Ah! how you wanted to accompany me!—and when I refused, on account of the expense and so on, how earnestly you enjoined me not to go near the villa in case of being seen and arrested! Your very importunity on that point made me suspect something—though I did not know what. Well, on coming to London, I *did* go to the villa: and I rummaged through all your drawers to see if there were any letters or papers which you were fearful of falling into my hands. But instead of any such documentary evidence, I found a corpse concealed in the bath—and what was more, a rope-ladder along with it——"

"Enough, sir—enough!" said Ernestina, in a hoarse voice, and with a dread quivering of the limbs. "It is useless to prolong the present scene, so painful to us both."

"More painful to you, I fancy, than to me," observed Paul Dysart, with characteristic brutality. "What the devil do you mean? You inflict upon me a long tirade of reproaches—you sum up all *my* misdeeds—and you will not listen to my counter-statement! But I choose to recapitulate those incidents," he added, rising and placing his back against the door.

Ernestina took a seat, and gazed abstractedly upon the fire which was smouldering in the grate.

"Well, as I was saying," continued her husband, now animated with a fiendish desire to torture her as much as possible, and also hoping thereby to reduce her to submission, as he had done on so many, many previous occasions,—"as I was saying, I not only found the corpse but also the rope-ladder. The features were not so disfigured but that I was able to recognise who the deceased was: and the rope-ladder told the entire tale plainly enough. Moreover, I called to mind your confusion when you met me on the night of our departure from the villa—your pretext about the loss of your ring—and several other circumstances which made the whole thing as plain as the sun at noon-day. Well, I hastened back to Paris—accused you of your infidelity—and horrified you with an account of the proofs thereof! Ah! how you humbled yourself then—how you fell at my feet—tore your hair—beat your bosom—and watered the very floor with your tears! Yes—you understood it all—your paramour had been suffocated—perhaps even while you were packing up

your boxes on the lid of the very bath which became his coffin! You implored me to conceal the effects of your fault—to hide the damning proof of your guilt. Then was it that the idea struck me of rendering your charms subservient to my purposes. I propounded my plan—you swore in your despair to do anything or everything if I would only consign to the earth that evidence of your frailty which was still unburied. I consented—but, mistrusting you I vowed that the corpse should not be moved until *you* had performed your portion of the compact. To this you were compelled to agree. We came to England—and you fulfilled your agreement, playing you part admirably with the Prince and obtaining the requisite document. Then I forced you to visit your uncle and receive the money for the pocket-book. This you did likewise: and then I allowed the corpse to be interred. Thus far we have been of mutual assistance: and now we should grant mutual pardon likewise. But no such thing. You get a new cretchet into your head—and you say that you are determined upon a separation. I say that I won't have it at the price: and now it remains to be seen who will get the best off if we go to war with each other."

Ernestina made no reply—but sate gazing abstractedly upon the grate in which the fire was now extinguished. She was motionless: her countenance was ghastly pale—and she only held the knife mechanically in her hand, without being conscious that she still retained it. Deep and unutterable thoughts were concentrated in her mind,—thoughts of her dead lover, his many admirable qualities, the graces of his person, and the boundless affection which he had entertained for her!

"Well, have you nothing to say?" inquired her husband, after a pause of upwards of a minute.

Ernestina started—recollected herself—and replied in a cold tone, "Nothing more than the resolve which I have already communicated to you."

"Then you are decided?" he said, in a voice hoarse with passion.

"Unalterably," was her answer. "You may kill me—but while I have life in me I will never consent to remain with you after this night."

"But for the rest of this night——"

"We must stay beneath the same roof. I am ill—exhausted—worn out alike in mind and body," said Ernestina, in a plaintive voice: "or I would quit the house this moment. Would that I had never come back to it!" she added, bitterly.

"Well, I consent that we occupy different chambers," said Dysart, completely puzzled how to act: "but I warn you that I shall make you a prisoner in the house till you swear the most solemn oath that you renounce all ideas of leaving me."

"Let us occupy different chambers, then," observed Ernestina, repeating his proposal; and she felt her courage and her spirits alike reviving at the advantage she had already gained in the contest with her brutal husband.

Still retaining the knife in her hand, and now clutching it with the consciousness that it was a weapon of defence, she took up a candle and moved towards the door. Dysart not only made way, but retreated to some distance, as if to convince her that he would not attempt to do her an injury. In fact, the bully was somewhat cowed and much dismayed by the cold desperation of her manner: the long speech which he had delivered, had evidently failed in its intended effect of overawing her—and his hope was that the morrow would find her in a more plastic humour and ductile temperament.

He therefore allowed her to ascend tranquilly and unmolested to the chamber which she selected for herself: and following her at a distance, he locked the door of that room which she thus entered. He then retired to his own apartment, muttering to himself, "Her old uncle shall either agree to double the proposed income—or I will keep her with me, and make a market of her charms."

With this diabolical reflection uppermost in his mind, Paul Dysart went to bed and soon fell asleep.

But in the meantime Ernestina had not sought her couch—nor was she making the slightest preparation to retire to rest. On the contrary, she had thrown herself into an arm-chair and was giving way to her reflections. The physical and mental exhaustion of which she ere now complained, was no longer felt: her courage had revived—she was nerved with a desperate energy. The dreadful scene that had just taken place between her husband and herself, convinced her that henceforth she must either become the slave of his despotic will, or else behold in him an implacable enemy. She understood full well the reasons which prevented him from agreeing to a separation: and she did not choose to allow her uncle's generosity to be taxed beyond the amount which he himself had volunteered as an adequate provision for Dysart. Nor would she consent to remain with a man who was base enough to contemplate the barter of her charms for gold. In addition to all these powerful motives urging her to adopt some resolute and decisive step, the feeling of revenge had flamed up in her bosom and was already gnawing at her heart's core.

Her mind was speedily made up. She saw a means—one and the only means—of effecting her emancipation and wreaking her vengeance at the same time. The plan was bold—desperate—and fraught with danger to herself, inasmuch as it might, if suspected and seen through by her husband, lead him to adopt a counter-vengeance and proclaim the tale of the bath-room and the buried body. But still she saw a way of carrying out her purposes, and yet inducing Dysart to keep the seal of silence upon his lips relative to that appalling tragedy. Her resolve was accordingly taken: she would dare and risk everything for freedom and revenge!

It was now past two in the morning: but she had not the least inclination to sleep. Besides, when a desperate and vindictive woman has determined upon a particular course of action, she does not rest while she should be working in the furtherance of her design. Ernestina was a prisoner in that chamber: but it was important for her to leave it for a short half-hour. How was this to be done, so that her husband should not discover in the morning that his precaution of locking the door had been vain and futile?

Ernestina examined the door carefully. It had one of those usual bed-room locks which instead of being inserted in the wood-work itself, was

LADY ERNESTINA DYSART.

screwed on to the door. If she had an instrument she might unscrew that lock, and thus free herself. Her eyes wandered slowly round the room in search of what she required: and they settled upon the knife which she had brought up with her, and which she had laid on the table. Thus the same proceeding which had facilitated the escape of Louisa Stanley from the Minor Canon's house at Canterbury, was now adopted by Lady Ernestina Dysart to emancipate herself from the chamber at Beechey Manor.

The lock was speedily removed: she opened the door—took the light in her hand—and descended to the dining-room. There she obtained writing-materials—sate down—and hastily penned the following note:—

"To the Chief Magistrate at Bow Street.

"Mr. Paul Dysart, who shot the Honourable George Sefton at Lord Herbert's house, in the month of June last, and against whom a verdict of '*Wilful Murder*' has been returned by a Coroner's Jury, is now living at Beechey Manor near Wandsworth, under the name of Bradshaw. Great precautions must be used in capturing him, as there are several avenues of escape from the house; and he is cunning in the extreme. By no means let him learn how his presence in England has been discovered; and on no account let him see this letter, which, though anonymous, contains the truth."

Having folded, sealed, and addressed the letter, Lady Ernestina Dysart consulted her watch. It was now three o'clock in the morning: and she hesitated whether to take the next step immediately, or wait a little. But her mind was soon made up: and having decided on proceeding in her plan without delay, she quitted the dining-room—passed into the back premises of the Manor—and entered a small chamber where Underdown and his wife slept.

The old couple were fast asleep in bed: but Ernestina awoke them, placing her finger upon her lips to enjoin silence. They were naturally

alarmed at being thus disturbed: Lady Dysart, however, hastened to reassure them as to the motive of her presence there; and as they had received many kindnesses from her, during the short period of her residence at the Manor, they were not annoyed at being startled from their slumbers.

"You must do me a very particular favour," she said, when they were thus tranquillised: "and above all things, I conjure you to observe a profound secrecy as to all that passes between us."

"You know, ma'am, that we don't gossip," replied Mrs. Underdown. "No living soul has heard us breathe a syllable about the strange affair that took place here t'other Monday night—when the place was hung with the black cloth and the carriage come with all those men——"

"Well, well—we don't want a history of all that over again," interrupted old Tom Underdown, testily, as he sate up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"I was only proving to the lady that we don't bother ourselves about other people's concerns," exclaimed Mrs. Underdown. "Howsomever, I'll hold my tongue, and let Mrs. Bradshaw tell us what she wishes done. We're both ready to serve you, ma'am, to the best of our poor ability."

"I know you are—and I thank you," answered Ernestina. "What I now require," she continued, addressing herself to the old man, "is that you get up at once—leave the house by the back gate as quietly as possible—and take this letter up to London. But you must be sure and return by breakfast-time, so that Mr. Bradshaw may see you working as usual in the garden: for he must on no account have reason to suspect, either this morning or afterwards, that you undertook such an errand for me."

"What o'clock is it, ma'am?" inquired the old fellow.

"Just three," answered Lady Ernestina: "about five minutes past."

"Oh! there's plenty of time," said Underdown. "Where is the letter to be delivered?"

"Put it in the letter-box at the Police Office in Bow Street," replied Ernestina: "and if there be no letter-box, thrust it underneath the door."

"The Police Office?" echoed the old couple, in a breath: and they gazed up at Ernestina with uneasy looks.

"Yes—the Police Office," she repeated, emphatically. "But fear nothing. Keep your own counsel—and all will be well. Besides, you have done naught to render you timid or apprehensive——"

"No, ma'am—certainly not," observed Underdown. "But being privy, as one may say, to the business of t'other night——"

"Not at all," interrupted Ernestina. "You merely assisted in hanging up the black cloth—and then you remained close in your own room. With anything that took place afterwards you had no concern. Besides, the object of this letter has not the least reference to *that* affair—neither will it transpire in what may follow. Do what I tell you—keep your own counsel—and here are ten guineas for you."

"We shan't have ears or eyes for anything you don't want us to hear or see, ma'am," said old Underdown, his wrinkled face brightening up marvellously at the sight of the gold. "So now I'll be off."

Ernestina then quitted the chamber occupied by the old couple: and, retracing her way to the hall, she was about to ascend the stairs to her own room, when the sound of a footstep fell upon her ear.

Heavens! if it were her husband, he would suspect her of some sinister intention—he might even murder her in his rage! The colour fled from her cheeks, leaving her pale as death: her heart was chilled—it seemed ice at the very core;—and her breath was hushed in awful suspense. For a few moments she paused and listened: some one was evidently descending the stairs stealthily—and the mysterious visitor Jones flashed to her recollection! Yes—it must be he: for assuredly her husband would not walk about the house with such studied caution and noiselessness.

Relieved by the thought, Ernestina glided into the dining-room—extinguished the light—and concealed herself behind the window-curtains. If it should happen to be Dysart, she hoped to be safe in that retreat: and she was equally averse to encounter his friend Jones, who would be sure to tell him, when next they met, that he had seen his wife wandering about at that hour. Thus Ernestina had a double motive for concealing herself in the manner described.

Stealthily did the steps continue to descend the stairs—next they crossed the hall—and then they approached the dining-room. Ernestina's suspense was fearful to a degree: an awful consternation was upon her. That the individual was the *soi-disant* Mr. Jones, she had now no longer the slightest doubt. But what could he want?—what motive had he in creeping about the house at such an hour and in such a manner? Was plunder his aim? If so, he would murder any one whom he discovered espying his actions!

Such were the terrible reflections that swept through the brain of the terrified lady as she stood, rigid, motionless, and cold as a marble statue, behind the curtains. The individual entered the dining-room: Ernestina's eyes caught the gleam of a light through the heavy drapery;—but she dared not peep forth—the blood was curdled in her veins!

"I hope the brandy isn't locked up, after all!" muttered the individual in an audible tone, as he advanced across the room.

The voice was the same which had answered her when she spoke from the window on the preceding night: the stealthy intruder was therefore, as she had suspected, none other than Mr. Jones. He was no burglar who had just broken into the house: but the guest whom her husband had received and lodged at the Manor.

And that voice—it again sounded familiar to her ears! An irresistible curiosity, rendered more poignant by a vague but tremendous suspicion which had just sprung up in her mind, prompted her to peep between the curtains: but no pen can describe the awful sensation which seized upon her, when she recognised the countenance of the man who had dug the grave in the garden of the villa at Blackheath!

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE RESULTS OF THE LETTER.

A CRY of horror rose to Ernestina's lips: but it was met—choked—and stifled, ere it burst forth, by a return of that tremendous consternation which had already seized upon her once within the last few minutes. Transfixed to the spot where she stood behind the curtain, she was again cold—motionless—and rigid as a statue: and as a marble statue was she also pale!

She knew not who the man was—she was even ignorant of his name: but there was something so fearfully sinister in his looks, that the presence of a loathsome reptile in the room could not have produced a more powerful effect upon her. And then, to think that such a man should be her husband's guest—perhaps his friend,—a man who had dug a grave with all the cool unconcern of a matter of business, and who had handled and buried the corpse of her paramour with a kindred indifference,—the idea that such a man was an inmate of the house, struck Ernestina with the direst horror.

But she remained perfectly still and motionless behind the curtains, while the fellow tried the doors of the side-board. They were locked: and he gave vent to a fearful imprecation, which enhanced Ernestina's alarm at his desperate character.

"Well, this is devilish pleasant," he muttered to himself. "Not to be able to sleep a wink—and to have nothing to drive away thought with. By jingo! I'll break open the doors of this cursed side-board——Ah! here are the keys, by Satan!"

And this imprecation, which was uttered with a fearful emphasis, struck awfully upon the ear of the listening lady behind the curtain.

Mr. Jones now proceeded to try one key after another; and in a brief space he succeeded in opening the wine-cooler of the side-board. To his supreme satisfaction he found a bottle of liquor; and having assured himself, by the test of a long draught, that it was brandy, he expressed his delight in audible terms. He then locked up the wine-cooler again, and took his departure from the room with the bottle in one hand and his candle in the other.

Ernestina's breath appeared to return with an ease that increased in proportion as the retreating footsteps became less and less audible: and when some minutes had elapsed and the house was again quiet, she stole forth from her hiding-place. But she had now to descend to the kitchen to procure a light for her candle; and, having done this, she retraced her way cautiously and stealthily to her chamber.

The task of restoring the lock to its place upon the door did not occupy many minutes; and by the time the work was accomplished, she felt so thoroughly worn out and exhausted alike in mind and body, that she could scarcely undress herself. But at length she laid aside her apparel and sought the couch. At first she feared that the agitated condition of her thoughts and the thousand topics which kept them in a dizzy whirl, would prevent her from obtaining that slumber which was so necessary to recruit her mental and physical energies for all that was to happen during the day now about to dawn: but nature speedily indemnified herself for the fatigues and rending anxieties that had been undergone.

She soon fell asleep, and slept soundly too. When she awoke, her watch informed her that it was nine o'clock; and she hastily quitted her couch. A glance flung from the window, showed her old Underdown working diligently in the garden;—and she felt assured that her errand had been accomplished. Perhaps the letter was already in the hands of the Chief Magistrate?

Ernestina felt that she had now a difficult part to play—a part that was likewise loathsome and revolting to her feelings. For she was about to manifest the utmost submission to her husband—induce him to believe that there was a thorough revival of affection on her part—coax, wheedle, and caress him—and, in fine, adopt all possible means to lull him into a false security with respect to her feelings and her conduct.

Scarcely was her morning-toilette completed, when Dysart unlocked the door and entered the room. The glance which he flung upon his wife was followed by a gleam of triumph irradiating his countenance: for he read mingled contrition and submissiveness in her whole demeanour.

"Well, Ernestina," he said, in a mild voice, "is it to be peace or war?"

"Peace—by all means, peace," she exclaimed: "that is, if I did not go too far last night to render peace impossible?"

"Since I asked the question, it must have been with the view of leaving the decision in your hands," returned Dysart. "I thought you would see the folly of a rupture with me:—it could answer no good end—because our affairs, interests, and secrets are too intimately blended not to render it prudent for us to work in harmony and in concert. Do you regard the matter in the same light?"

"Precisely," was the response, delivered with much apparent earnestness. "Besides, after all that has occurred I should not in any case desert you so long as my services may at any moment be required in your behalf?"

"What do you particularly allude to?" asked Dysart.

"I mean that if circumstances should render it necessary to use that document which I obtained from the Prince Regent——"

"Of course! the thing would have to be managed delicately and prudently," exclaimed Dysart. "It could not be entrusted to clumsy hands—for my very life may be made to depend upon that paper."

"Think you, then," said Ernestina, approaching her husband with tears in her eyes, "that I would leave you in danger and difficulty, after taking so much trouble to procure that document?. No, no: I do not possess a bad heart—although my temper may be hasty——But you should make allowances for my feelings after such a scene as that which occurred last night in Soho Square. To think that I should have been thus exposed to Lord Leveson! Ah! it was enough to goad me almost to madness—or plunge me into despair!"

"Well, I dare say that I was too hasty and severe in judging you," said Dysart. But come—we will say no more relative to the past: and let us be better friends for the future."

"Such is my earnest hope," answered the lady, wiping her eyes.

They then descended to the breakfast-parlour; and Ernestina continued to behave with the utmost kindness towards her husband. Of her own accord she arranged Mr. Jones's meal upon the tray; although she could scarcely repress a visible shudder when she thought of the wretch for whom she was thus preparing his food, which Dysart hastened to carry up to him.

After breakfast, Ernestina went into the domestic offices to issue her commands respecting the dinner; and she found an opportunity of exchanging a few words with Underdown. The old man had faithfully executed her commission; and she once more charged him and his wife not to betray any uneasiness or exhibit any suspicious emotion, should some startling occurrence take place during the day. Having thus again reassured the old couple, Ernestina repaired to the drawing-room, where her husband was lounging upon a sofa, reading a book.

It was now nearly eleven o'clock, and Ernestina was trembling inwardly with an intense anxiety and nervousness. The officers of justice might be expected every moment; and so much—indeed, everything—depended upon whether Dysart should suspect that she had aught to do with his arrest. She weighed in her mind all the chances for and against this result: her imagination was on the rack in reviewing the measures she had adopted and the calculations she had made. Her better judgment convinced her that she was safe and secure; but her fears suggested the contrary. She was like one who has committed a crime all traces of which have in reality disappeared, but the discovery of which a guilty conscience is ever whispering to be imminent.

When she entered the drawing-room, Dysart laid down his book, and began to converse upon a variety of indifferent topics. He evidently had determined upon adopting a conciliatory policy towards his wife: but she did not repent of what she had done. In fact, the longer she meditated upon the character of her husband and the life she had led with him, the more she was resolved to emancipate herself from so abhorrent a thraldom, under any circumstances. This feeling on her part gradually inspired her with the necessary courage and presence of mind to go through with the measures she had initiated; and sitting down to her needle-work, she conversed calmly, kindly, and submissively with the man whom she had determined to send to the gibbet.

It was about mid-day, when old Mrs. Underdown entered the drawing-room to say that a person who had just arrived from France, with letters from General Beechey, desired to see Mr. Bradshaw. Ernestina dropped her work in the sudden confusion which seized upon her: for she felt convinced that the crisis was now at hand. But her emotion passed unobserved by her husband; and she instantaneously recovered her presence of mind.

Dysart was evidently struck with a suspicion that all was not right: but he entertained not the remotest idea that Ernestina was plotting against him.

"What sort of a man is he?" he inquired hastily of the old woman. "But did you say I was at home?"

"I said I didn't know, sir—I would see," she answered. "He seems a respectable-looking person, short and slight——"

"Shall I see him, Ernestina?" asked Dysart, turning uneasily towards his wife, and speaking to her in the French language, with which they were both intimately conversant. "Do you not think it is singular that Beechey should send over a messenger instead of writing by the post? Because he and I have nothing so very important between us——"

"I really know not how to advise," responded Ernestina, also in the French tongue. "It may be a stratagem: and yet——"

"Well, at all events, I must risk it," exclaimed Dysart: then turning to the old woman, he said, "Show the person up."

The instant Mrs. Underdown had quitted the room, Dysart handed Ernestina a key, saying in a hurried and nervous manner, "Now, if this should really be a trick, you must instantaneously go to the bed-room, open my desk, and secure the document about your person: because if I am taken, my papers may be searched. And, by the bye, there's that fellow——"

"Jones?" ejaculated Ernestina, impatiently. "What of him? Does he incur any risk?"

"Why—they will scarcely search the house if they secure me," exclaimed Dysart. "But——"

He stopped short: for at this moment Mrs. Underdown re-appeared, introducing the visitor into the room. She immediately withdrew; and both Dysart and his wife threw rapid and searching glances upon the individual who now stood in their presence. But there was nothing of that ill-looking demeanour and suspicious mien which the imagination is wont to associate with its ideas of an officer of justice. Nevertheless, Dysart was evidently uneasy, while Ernestina felt convinced that the man was a myrmidon of the law.

"Mr. Dysart," he said, "I am sorry to be compelled to do my duty—and resistance will be vain. My people have surrounded the house——"

"O heaven!" screamed Ernestina, with an admirably assumed outburst of feeling: and she clasped her hands as if in the deepest anguish.

"Don't make yourself miserable, my dear," said Dysart, flinging upon her a significant look to remind her of his injunctions relative to the writing-desk. "You had better leave the room——"

"Yes—I think your ladyship had better withdraw," observed Larry Sampson—for he it was: although Ernestina had not recognised in him the sham postman of the preceding Friday.

"But are you going to take my husband away?" she cried, still sustaining that artificial show of grief which was as successfully assumed as were the blandishments which in that very apartment she had lavished upon the Prince Regent.

"Your ladyship shall see him again before he goes," answered Larry. "I am in no hurry to remove him, if he behaves as a gentleman should."

Ernestina embraced Dysart with affected enthusiasm, and then hurried from the room. Speeding to the bed-chamber, she hastily unlocked the desk—took out the document—and secured it about her person. She then closed the desk again, leaving the key in it.

"Ah! now my vengeance will be consummated!" she murmured to herself, her whole manner and appearance suddenly changing from assumed grief and submissiveness into the desperate energy of an outraged and resolute woman. "I have not played the hypocrite without avail: I won back

his confidence—and he has entrusted into my hands the only means of saving his life. But he is a doomed man—yes, a doomed man: and I shall be free!"

There was now something terrible and even awful in the beauty of Ernestina Dysart, as she thus gave way to her vindictive musings. Her eyes flashed fire—her whole form dilated—her bosom swelled with grand upheavings—and her countenance, which had become pale as marble, wore an expression of stern decision, like that of a Roman matron when sending forth her son to die in the defence of his country.

Having remained for a few minutes in the bedchamber, Ernestina went back to the drawing-room, where she found two other constables, in addition to Larry Sampson; and her husband was drinking a glass of brandy-and-water, doubtless to keep up his spirits. The lady resumed an aspect of profound grief: but Dysart bade her "cheer up, as the thing must have happened sooner or later." She saw that he entertained not the slightest suspicion of her treachery towards him; and she averted her head to conceal the joy and satisfaction which swelled in her heart and which she feared might beam forth in her looks.

"I suppose you will allow me to say a few words apart to her ladyship?" said Dysart, addressing Sampson.

"In this room, by all means," was the response.

Dysart then drew his wife into the recess of the bay-window, and whispered in French, "I suppose you have got the document safe?"

She replied in the affirmative.

"So much the better," observed Dysart. "But I don't think they mean to search the house: indeed, why should they? They have got me—and that is all they want. It appears that the principal man there—the one who came up first—is Sampson, the famous officer: but he won't tell me how he found me out."

"Perhaps you were seen, recognised, and watched on some occasion?" said Ernestina. "But since the mischief is done, it is useless to waste time in speculating how it was caused. What do you wish me to do?" she asked, in a tone of submission.

"I suppose you won't like to live here all by yourself?" said Dysart, inquiringly.

"No—Oh! no," answered Ernestina. "I would either take a lodging near the place where you will be confined——"

"Newgate, my dear—Newgate," observed Dysart, with a sickly smile. "We need not mince matters: I shall experience the reality soon enough. But if you would prefer going to Albemarle Street, I have no objection under the circumstances——"

"I should be loath to do anything that will add to your sorrows," observed the lady, raising her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Come—perhaps this grief on your part is more than I deserve," said her husband, his harsh nature softened for the moment by the appearance of profound sorrow on Ernestina's part. "All things considered, you had perhaps better take a lodging near Newgate: unless you prefer staying with the Marquis. But since we have agreed upon peace," added Dysart, now feeling that he was entirely in his wife's power, "I would rather you should consult your own wishes. There is one thing, remember, to be considered—which is, that the Prince has frequently visited your uncle of late, and you might meet him at Leveson House."

"And should I not avail myself of those opportunities to strengthen the claim which we already possess upon him?" said Ernestina, apparently with a tone and look of profound sincerity.

"Ah! if you would do *that*," said Dysart, "I cannot object——"

"You know—you *must* know, Paul," she murmured, "that I will do everything—anything to ensure your safety!"

"Then go to Leveson House, by all means," he answered: "and when I am once more at liberty—as I must inevitably be in a few weeks—I will convince you that I am not ungrateful."

"Yes—it will be all over in a few weeks," said Ernestina, deeply feeling all the ominous significancy of the words which she had just repeated.

"Then you will leave the Manor in the course of the day?" observed Dysart. "But—but," he added, hesitatingly, "you had better not see that fellow Jones. Tell old Underdown to explain to him what has happened to me——"

"Your suggestions shall be acted upon," interrupted Ernestina. "I will procure a glass-coach from Wandsworth and repair to Leveson House within a couple of hours. To-morrow I will call and see you——"

"I shall be anxiously expecting you, my dear Ernestina," observed Dysart. "And now—before I go—tell me whether you forgive me for the past?"

"Do you forgive *me*?" she whispered, in a tremulous voice.

"Yes—let us embrace," replied her husband: and Ernestina submitted to the ordeal with an inward shuddering—for it seemed to her as if the man she had once loved with so deep an infatuation, was already a corpse stiff and stark from the gallows.

They then separated—Dysart taking his departure with the Bow Street officers: and within two hours he was lodged in Newgate.

Ernestina, who had no inclination to meet Mr. Jones face to face, sent him by Underdown a message to the effect enjoined by her husband; and having liberally rewarded the old couple for all their attentions, she entered the glass-coach which had been procured from Wandsworth to take her to Leveson House.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A HAPPY FAMILY.—THE PRINCESS.

In a splendidly-furnished drawing-room, at one of the finest mansions in Piccadilly, three persons were seated. These were Lord and Lady Florimel, with their niece, the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton.

The nobleman was about forty-one or forty-two years of age—short and slender, but remarkably handsome. It was evident from his appearance that he must in his youth have been of a feminine cast of beauty: for his features were small and of classic outline—his dark hair was long and

curled naturally—and his whiskers were only of comparatively recent growth. His teeth were admirable, and his complexion was remarkably pure.

Lady Florimel, whose Christian name was Pauline, was thirty-eight; and, although inclining to embonpoint, she was exceedingly handsome alike in countenance and form. Her tall stature prevented the expansion of her charms from appearing too luxuriant: but the richness of their contours was grandly developed. Her marriage with Florimel had remained unblest by offspring: and thus nothing had marred the splendour of that beauty which still seemed to retain all the first freshness of youth. Her hair, of a dark brown, was remarkably luxuriant: her teeth were as perfect and as brilliant as when the parting roses of the lips revealed them in the smiles of her girlhood;—and she had not mingled sufficiently in the pleasures and gaiety of the fashionable world to have lost the carnation from her cheeks in the hot and unwholesome atmosphere of ball-rooms.

Lady Florimel's elder sister, Octavia, had married the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who at the death of his father became Lord Marchmont. But he did not long survive this accession to the family title and estates: his constitution had been considerably undermined by the treacheries and misfortunes he had experienced in his youth—and he sank into an early grave. The title became extinct: the landed property passed into the hands of a distant male relative of the family;—but Lady Marchmont was left with a comfortable income derived from money in the funds. Her charming daughter Florence was then her only consolation: and though the worm of early sorrows had eaten its cankering way into her heart, she still hoped and prayed to live long enough to see the dearly beloved girl grow up to woman's estate. But in this aspiration she was disappointed: a severe cold which she caught, threw her upon a sick bed—and in a few days she breathed her last.

Florence was eight years old when she thus lost her mother. But she found an affectionate substitute in her aunt Pauline, who at once took the orphan under her care: and as Lord Florimel had no children of his own, he soon learnt to love little Florence as dearly as if she were his daughter. The orphan girl grew up in beauty and innocence: and at the time we now introduce her to our readers, she is nineteen years old.

But let us draw the portrait of Florence Eaton as she appeared on that occasion, when seated with her uncle and aunt at the palatial mansion in Piccadilly.

She was one of those Madonna-like creatures who seem too fair to inhabit this cold, selfish world of our's. Her complexion was of the purest white and dazzlingly transparent, so that upon her high and innocent forehead, where candour was enthroned on its unblemished ivory seat, the delicate tracery of azure veins appeared through the diaphanous skin. Her hair, which was of a light brown tinged with a golden hue, fell in the profusion of countless tresses upon her shoulders and back: for it was worn as in girlhood and with none of it gathered up in a knot behind.

Her eyes were azure—not large, but full of a peculiar and melting softness, which was also visible in her smile. Her brows were darker than her hair, but delicately pencilled: and her long lashes were a shade darker still. Her nose was perfectly straight—her lips were of the brightest coral in hue, and seemed cut with the precision of a classic chisel—and her chin was turned with an equally artistic accuracy.

Her shape was that of a sylph. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the swan-like neck, or the statuesque carriage of the shoulders. The bust was gently developed in flowing outline, sufficient to enhance the beauty of her person, but not too much to mar the airy lightness of her figure. The elegance of her symmetry was combined with a willowy flexibility of the form: her feet moved so glancingly along that it appeared impossible for them to leave their imprint upon the softest carpet, nor crush the most delicate flower.

Indeed, nothing could exceed the almost infantile loveliness of this charming, Madonna-like creature. And to bring a tear into that soft azure eye—to check the smile upon those bright red lips—to extort a sigh from that gentle breast—to make that sweet head droop beneath the burden of affliction—or to render that clear silver voice tremulous with sobs,—Oh! this were a cruelty of which none save a monster undeserving the name of Man, or a fiend desecrating the form of Woman, could possibly be capable!

In her artless disposition and guileless nature, she was gay and happy; and her soft musical laugh was fresh and pure as the rippling of the crystal stream whose pebbly bottom is as visible as an eye-ball through a tear. And it was so beautiful to see her smile—not only because there was the heavenly irradiation of innocence beaming on her countenance, but also because the coral lips when thus sweetly wreathing displayed the two rows of pearl that formed her teeth.

Such was Florence Eaton: and no wonder was it that such a fair and nymph-like being should be the cherished darling of her uncle and aunt, or be loved by them with as much tenderness as they could possibly have bestowed upon an only daughter. From the period when her orphan destiny consigned her to their care, they had reared her with the most watchful attention. A trustworthy and competent governess had taught her all useful knowledge and elegant accomplishments; and her readings had been selected by Lady Florimel herself. Every barrier, in a word, was raised up by the care of the excellent Pauline to protect her beloved niece from the pestilential atmosphere of the world's contamination; and yet all these precautions were managed with so much delicacy and tact, that Florence was never made to feel the slightest restraint. But then, so admirable were the teachings she received from her governess and so careful the inculcations of her aunt, that her mind became plastic to the purest thoughts and ductile to the chastest aspirations only.

Lord Florimel had been more than gay in his earlier years: he was a positive voluptuary in his amours, and was unwearied in his pursuit of pleasure. But such men often make exemplary husbands, and assuredly the best fathers or guardians. So it was with Gabriel Florimel. He had sown his wild oats when young: but from the day of his marriage, his conduct—nay, his very character—appeared to have undergone a complete change. Ah! he was one of those men who can appreciate and who learn to bless the example of a pure-minded

wife! For such was his Pauline: and all the salutary and heavenly influence which a virtuous woman must ever exercise in her special sphere, as a clear-burning lamp lights up the space around, had wrought its beneficent effects upon the mind of Lord Florimel. He loved his wife, because she was a pattern of every female virtue: and he loved his home, because she made it happy. He would not have deceived her for worlds: no temptation could possibly have rendered him faithless to one so good, so pure, so loving. And thus was he not only an excellent husband to a most deserving lady, but also a kind, careful, and affectionate guardian to a charming niece.

The Florimels mingled not much in the gaiety of the fashionable world; and their circle of acquaintances was rather select than brilliant. They never appeared at Court: for there were family circumstances which led them to forbear even from mentioning the name of the Prince Regent save when compelled by the turn which others might give to the conversation. For before her marriage with the Honourable Mr. Eaton (afterwards Lord Marchmont) Octavia, Pauline's elder sister, had fallen a victim to the royal voluptuary; and Pauline herself had been outraged by his polluted overtures. The latter however, had spurned the dishonourable addresses of the man to whose lust her sister had so unhappily fallen a prey;—but although there were certain circumstances which prevented Lady Florimel from ever expressing her abhorrence of the Prince aloud, she did not the less entertain a deep loathing for him in her heart.

The Princess Sophia, one of the Royal Family, was however an occasional visitress at the mansion of Lord and Lady Florimel; and she was much attached to the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton. But her Royal Highness, who was no stranger to the amour which had taken place nineteen years previously between her elder brother and Pauline's sister, never mentioned that brother's name when dining or calling at the mansion in Piccadilly.

Having thus glanced at the affairs and position of the Florimel family, we may resume the thread of our narrative in due course.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon that we find the uncle, the aunt, and the niece seated together in the drawing-room. The two ladies were occupied with embroidery; while Lord Florimel was conversing with them. But the discourse was suddenly interrupted by a loud knock at the street-door; and in a few moments a domestic announced her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia.

This lady was about the same age as Pauline—that is to say, thirty-eight. Like Pauline, also, she was tall and finely formed: but her embonpoint had expanded into a far greater luxuriance, which, together with the traces of incipient wrinkles upon her countenance and the evident use of an artificial bloom on the cheeks, made her seem some years older. Still she was a splendid woman; and in her look and entire appearance there was that voluptuousness—that animal sensuousness—which has not failed to characterise every female scion of the family of George III. The lank light brown hair—the swimming blue eye—the fulness of the lips, ever slightly parted—the remarkable volume of the bosom—the somewhat rounded shoulders—and the just perceptible rolling in the gait,—these were the indications of that amorous disposition and warm temperament which the Princess Sophia possessed to so great a degree, and which have been traditionary amongst the females of the Royal Family.

After the exchange of the usual greetings, the Princess intimated to Lady Florimel that she desired to speak to her alone. His lordship and Florence accordingly withdrew to another apartment; and her Royal Highness was left alone with her friend Pauline.

The Princess continued silent, overwhelmed with the confusion which her thoughts at that moment excited: and Lady Florimel was at no loss to conjecture the topic upon which Sophia was about to speak.

"Nineteen years and upwards have now elapsed, my dear friend," said her Royal Highness at length, and speaking in a voice that was low and tremulous,—"yes, more than nineteen years, since I became a mother at the house which you and your deceased sister then inhabited in the Edgeware Road. You remember, Pauline, that my poor babe was consigned, at the moment of his birth, to a surgeon of the name of Thurston: and from that period until the present time I have never made the slightest inquiry concerning my offspring. Imagine not, however," continued the Princess, tears trickling down her cheeks, "that I have never bestowed a thought upon that hapless boy. Yes—Oh! yes—his image has frequently presented itself to my mind—and there have been moments of bitter, burning anguish, in which I have reproached myself as the most unnatural of mothers. But the dread of shame—the fear of exposure—the awful terror lest my frailty should be made public, have hitherto sealed my lips and induced me to bury the past as much as possible in oblivion."

Her Royal Highness paused and wiped away the tears that were now gushing from the eyes which they dimmed: and Lady Florimel said not a word. For her own generous heart felt that if *she* had ever become a mother—even though her child were the offspring of shame—she could not have abandoned it in the first instance, nor have neglected it so utterly for a period verging towards twenty years!

"Last night I had a dreadful dream," continued her Royal Highness, shuddering at the recollections which now surged up like an overwhelming tide in her brain. "Methought that I was wandering in a churchyard, where the tomb-stones gleamed white in the pale moon-beams, as if those monuments were formed of the bleached bones of the dead that lay in their wormy graves beneath. How I came thither, or with what object I was roving stealthily through the silent cemetery, my vision did not show. But I felt an icy coldness upon me, as if the hand of death lay immoveable upon my naked shoulder;—it was a chill that searched me through and through, penetrating to my very heart's core. Gradually I became aware that I was not alone in the churchyard; but that pale phantom shapes, dim and undefined, were seated upon the flat stones or standing behind the raised ones. A stupendous consternation was upon me: the cold light of the moon seemed to be a sort of transparent silver mist, filling the churchyard, so

that I beheld all surrounding objects as if through a thin veil of gauze or gossamer. And amidst this diaphanous filminess were seen those shadowy forms, like vapours assuming the shapes of the dead in their winding-sheets and cerements. I endeavoured to fly—but my feet became heavy as lead, and I was transfixed to the spot. I sought to close my eyes—but an invincible power compelled me to keep them open. And then, as I was thus forced to gaze upon the awful scene around, those phantom forms became more palpable; and stony eyes looked fixedly forth from the wrappings of the winding-sheets—and the faces of corpses appeared in the openings of these garments of the grave. Their long withered arms were stretched forth from those white cere-cloths—and lank, lean, skinny fingers were all pointed towards me. Oh! it was horrible—horrible! But slowly from the midst of the phantom throng a figure came forth: and an icier chill struck to my heart's core, and a deeper horror crept over me,—for the revelation of the mysterious vision seemed to be at hand. That figure advanced gradually—gradually: and when it was within a few yards of the spot where I was standing, it slowly threw back the white winding-sheet, and revealed the countenance of my departed sister Amelia. O Pauline!" continued the Princess, "you know how well—how fervently I loved that affectionate sister! We had no secrets from each other: she was acquainted with my love for him who was the father of my child—and I was no stranger to the hapless love which she also cherished."

Pauline threw a look of surprise upon the royal lady; for this was the first time she had ever heard that the late Princess Amelia, whose death occurred between four and five years previously to the date of our tale, had experienced the sorrows of an unhappy love.

"Yes, my dear friend," continued the Princess Sophia, moved by her feelings to make a confidant of Lady Florimel, and experiencing the solace that always soothes the bosom which is enabled to unburthen its woes to the ear of friendship,—"my sister Amelia loved as deeply, as tenderly, and as yieldingly as I have loved. She also became a mother: but the offspring of her shame did not survive its birth. The secret was known to our parents: and her afflictions conducted her to a premature grave. But on her death-bed, in her ravings, she revealed my own secret also—and then my unhappy father and indignant mother learnt that *both* their favourite daughters had disgraced and dishonoured them. Ah! that was a dreadful scene—my poor sister's death-bed: for the ravings of her delirium were terrible—terrible!"

And overpowered by her recollections, the Princess Sophia covered her face with her hands—bent forward—and gave way to a flood of tears and to agonising sobs.

"But let me hasten and finish my dreadful tale," she said, suddenly yielding to the consolations which Pauline now offered her with the tenderest interest and most touching sympathy: then wiping her eyes once more, the Princess continued as follows:—"I was explaining to you how it appeared to me in my vision of last night, that my dead sister came forth from amidst the throng of shadowy shapes in the churchyard. Her countenance was marble pale—but beautiful as when I beheld her a corpse the same day on which she died in November, 1810. The expression of her features now appeared serene but mournful; and fixing her glassy eyes upon me—those eyes that once shone with the living light of heaven's own blessed azure—she spoke in a low sweet voice, that was tremulously clear. I cannot repeat what the phantom said, although every word be graven indelibly upon my mind, as if seared with red hot iron upon my brain: but it is too horrible—oh! far too horrible to recapitulate! Suffice it to say that she assured me my son was still living—she reproached me for my unnatural neglect of the offspring of my love—and she bade me lose no time in seeking for the youth who has a right to call me *mother!* Then it seemed to me in my vision, that the faculty of speech, hitherto suspended, was restored to me; and I asked her if she were happier in another world than she had been in this. But, O God! no tongue can describe the excruciating anguish which now appeared to pass over her countenance, nor the dread horror which added its blighting, withering, chilling influence to the consternation which was already upon me. She bared her bosom: methought that her form became transparent—and I could see through her! A pale blue flame was playing around her heart—a flame which I knew to be unextinguishable and eternal! Then, as the anguish of torture was still usurping the place of that serenity which had previously appeared upon her countenance, she spoke again; and this time her words were thrilling as the ice-blast, and borne upon a breath that was raw and penetrating as the damps of the grave. Yes—she spoke: and her words were to the effect that heaven is not for the rich, the titled, and the great ones who enjoy every luxury upon earth—but for the poor, the wretched, and the miserable of this world. The revelation—that awful revelation—of the secrets of a posthumous sphere, struck upon me as a frightful warning and a dread foreboding of my own future fate: and a piercing shriek thrilled from my lips. The churchyard and all the phantom shapes vanished in a moment: and I awoke, bathed in a cold, clammy, and death-like perspiration."

"The vision was a shocking one," observed Lady Florimel: "but still it was only a dream. In a few days your Royal Highness will cease to think of it."

"No—it has made a profound impression upon me," returned Sophia: then, lowering her voice to a whisper, she said, "You are aware that ever since the death of my poor sister Amelia, my unhappy father's mind has been a blank? O Pauline! it was the dread revelation made upon her death-bed concerning myself, which helped to consummate the tremendous calamity and deprive his Majesty of reason. Must I not, then, feel that I am guilty—very guilty, Pauline?—and can you not understand how such a dream as that which I experienced last night, was only too well calculated to excite the most rending remorse—the keenest compunction? Ah! I can assure you, my dear friend, that I am very, very miserable: and it seems as if the finger of heaven itself had pointed out for me a particular course through the medium of that vision."

"To what does your Royal Highness allude?" asked Lady Florimel.

"To the necessity of instituting an immediate

inquiry after my son," returned the Princess: "that is, if he be indeed alive. My thoughts are now fixed upon that object——"

"And not for a moment can I dissuade your Royal Highness from so laudable a proceeding," exclaimed the excellent-hearted lady.

"But I do not propose to declare to him the secret of his birth," continued Sophia. "I wish you, my dear friend, to make the requisite inquiries on my behalf—to ascertain what he is and where he is—and to glean every particular which you may imagine likely to interest a mother. Then may I become his secret benefactress—bestow all possible bounties upon him, without suffering him to learn the source whence they emanate—and do for him, in fine, as much as I can or dare perform. Now, will you aid me in this enterprise?"

"I will—most assuredly," answered Pauline. "I have every reason to believe that the Mr. Thurston to whom the child was consigned, is the same, eminent physician who lives in May Fair and who has obtained such renown in his profession. Years have however elapsed since I last saw him: but I will call upon him without delay."

"But he must not be acquainted with my secret, Pauline," said the Princess Sophia. "Unless indeed," she added, with a sigh, "he is already acquainted with it! And this is most probable: for he must have seen me—he must have recognized in me the lady who, under the name of Mrs. Mordaunt, became a mother at your former residence in the Edgeware Road, and whom he attended upon the occasion."

"At all events, if he be not acquainted with the secret," said Lady Florimel, "he shall not learn it from my lips. To one only person in the world have I ever breathed it—to one from whom my soul could keep nothing veiled——"

"I understand you, Pauline," observed the Princess, mournfully. "You mean your husband?

Oh! I do not blame you—I cannot be angry with you on that account. Had I become the happy wife of him whom I loved, I feel that I could have kept nothing from him. But your husband has preserved an inviolable secrecy?"

"Oh! inviolable," exclaimed Pauline. "Not for worlds would he breathe the tale to mortal ears! His honour is beyond all question!"

"You are happy—supremely happy in the possession of such a husband, Pauline," said the Princess Sophia. "So far as the indulgence of the heart's best and purest affections is concerned, my life is an impenetrable blank. Not for me may beam the smiles of a fond husband—not upon the pathway of my existence may the sunny eyes of innocent children shed their ineffable light! Chained to my royal destiny, I am compelled to mingle in the splendours, the pomps, the luxuries, and the ostentations of a Court: but those chains which thus bind me are galling and scathing, golden though they be! I am caressed—courted—flattered: but no particle of that adulation can give balm to my aching heart—my burning brain! Every eye contemplates me with respect: Oh! could those looks penetrate deep down into the profundities of my soul, they would find naught to envy there! When I know that I am the centre of all attraction in the brilliant assembly of rank, wealth, and fashion, that lofty elevation which to other women would be the proudest triumph, is to me the veriest mockery of my matchless, immitigable woe! The smiles that I force myself to lavish upon the gay and giddy throngs which then surround me, may appear to beam with the heart's happiness: but the efforts which they cost me are purchased with the agony of life itself. Or if for a brief space I do at times outstrip the whirl of crucifying remembrances, the reprieve is but short: on, on tear the harrowing recollections—they overtake me—enguif me in their furious sweep—fix their vulture-talons upon my heart—and shoot like millions of red-hot needles through my brain. For I feel that I am guilty—I know that my frailty and shame have entered into the causes which extinguished the light of my unhappy father's reason: I know also that my sister Amelia was very guilty—and that her love was characterised by circumstances of an appalling horror! Yes—my dear Pauline, I will tell you everything *now*. Know, then, that in his youth my father—the King of England—loved a beauteous creature—a certain Hannah Lightfoot, of whom you have doubtless heard. A son was the issue of that amour: and by a strange combination of circumstances, he was adopted by a baronet and his wife, who passed him off as their own son. He succeeded to their title and property: he became that Sir Richard Stamford whose misfortunes created so deep a sensation about nineteen years ago. Alas! he it was who gained my sister Amelia's love—he it was to whom she surrendered her virtue—and he was the father of her child which perished at its birth!"

"Her own half-brother!" said Pauline, with a cold tremor and in a subdued tone.

"He was—he was," returned the Princess. "And now, think you not that the reminiscences which often goad me almost to madness, are harrowing to a degree? A spell is upon the family to which I belong, Pauline—a spell that has stricken my father, my brothers, my sisters, and myself—a spell that often sends the shudder of death throughout my entire frame!"

"Talk not thus despondingly, I implore you," said Lady Florimel, in a voice of tender entreaty. "You are unhappy—and heaven knows you have enough to embitter your existence. But your Royal Highness will experience solace and comfort from the resolution which you have taken concerning your son: and to-morrow I will enter upon the inquiry which your Royal Highness has entrusted in my hands."

"Do so, dear Pauline: and write to me the moment you obtain the requisite information."

The Princess then embraced Lady Florimel with affectionate gratitude, and took her departure, somewhat soothed by the outpourings of her sorrows into the bosom of a faithful friend. Nor did she regret having suffered the tide of her feelings to hurry her into such delicate revelations to Pauline's ear: for the secrets to which her lips had thus given utterance, constituted a burthen too tremendous for her heart to bear alone any longer.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE TWO PHYSICIANS.

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the above scene; and Dr. Thurston was sitting at lunch in an elegantly-furnished parlour of his mansion in May Fair. His wife had gone out in the carriage to make some morning-calls; but the Doctor was not alone—for a brother-member of the faculty was keeping him company at the well-spread table.

Dr. Thurston was now in his sixtieth year. He had grown stout, sleek, and had a comfortable well-to-do appearance. The crown of his head was completely bald; and he wore powder. His eyes had a somewhat sinister, sharp, restless expression: but he could assume all the bland smiles and paternal benevolence of the fashionable physician, so that the disagreeable peculiarity of his regards was scarcely noticed.

His friend was Dr. Copperas, who was quite as celebrated as Thurston himself, and enjoyed an equal amount of practice. In fact, they had for years played into each other's hands, rendering mutual assistance in filling their pockets and puffing each other off. If Thurston had a difficult or dangerous case, he would of course suggest a consultation; and when requested to name some eminent practitioner to be called in, he would say, "Really I am loath to offer my advice upon the point: but every one knows that Dr. Copperas has made *this* malady his particular study." On the other hand, Dr. Copperas, when similarly situated, would observe after a little apparent reflection, "Well, I really don't know; but if I must name some eminent gentleman, I think that Dr. Thurston should be the one—for he excels in the treatment of *this* particular disease." Thus, according to the opinions which the two doctors were wont to pass upon each other, they had both made every malady under the sun their special study, and both excelled in the treatment of every physical evil to which flesh is heir.

If Dr. Thurston wrote an article in a medical

publication, he would introduce some such sentence as the following:—"And in this view of the nature and treatment of the disease, I am fully borne out by the testimony and experience of Dr. Copperas, who will pardon me for thus introducing his name into the disquisition." On the other hand, Dr. Copperas, when communicating an extraordinary case to a medical periodical, would not fail to observe that "the instance is not altogether unknown in the experience of the faculty, one of equal difficulty having some time since come under the cognizance of that eminent physician, Dr. Thurston, who was most successful in treating it upon the same plan."

Again, when Dr. Thurston published a bulky medical work, the little annotation of "See Dr. Copperas on Dispepsia," was frequently observed at the bottom of a page, with the usual asterisk: and when Dr. Copperas issued *his* book, the annotation of "See Dr. Thurston on Antiphlogistic Treatment," occurred in a similar manner. Moreover, Dr. Thurston dedicated his great work on the *Treatment of Carditis and Pericarditis* to Dr. Copperas, "as a humble tribute of admiration and respect;" and Dr. Copperas dedicated his bulky volume on *Phlebotomy* to Dr. Thurston, "as a humble tribute of respect and admiration."

When a vacancy occurred in the medical staff of the Prince Regent's household, Dr. Thurston was quite surprised that Dr. Copperas should have been passed over: while, on the other hand, Dr. Copperas was convinced that hole-and-corner work could alone have prevented Dr. Thurston from obtaining the appointment. If ever the King's malady happened to be mentioned when Dr. Thurston was calling upon a patient, he would be sure to shake his head solemnly and express a deep regret that the Royal Family had not thought fit to avail themselves of the eminent skill of Dr. Copperas: while, on his side, and under similar circumstances, Dr. Copperas would mysteriously hint that it was people's own fault if they didn't apply in the right quarter, as for instance to such a man as Dr. Thurston.

Thus Dr. Thurston hurled Dr. Copperas at the head of his patients; and Dr. Copperas as zealously flung Dr. Thurston at them:—so that Thurston be-puffed Copperas, and Copperas be-praised Thurston—and Thurston and Copperas, and Copperas and Thurston were invariably mentioned in the same breath by their patients in private and medical journals in public—and thus Thurston made Copperas, and Copperas made Thurston, until the most extensive West-end practice was monopolised between Thurston and Copperas.

On the occasion when we now find Dr. Copperas lunching with Dr. Thurston, they had just returned from a consultation; and having each pocketed a fifty guinea fee and seen their patient close his eyes for ever upon this world, they were in the best possible humour for a good luncheon.

"I am going to send an article on *Diabetes* to the *Medical Reformer* next week," observed Dr. Copperas, as he held a glass of sherry up before his eyes to delight them with the colour before he regaled his tongue with the taste; "and I mean to cut up Dr. Colycynth's theory hip and thigh."

"No—don't do that, my dear friend," said Thurston: "for Colycynth has spoken well of me in his *Essay on Hydrargyrum cum Creta*."

"Oh! that alters the case altogether," observed Copperas, sipping his wine. "I will laud him to the skies. But, by the bye, how gets on the article relative to *Siliagogues?*"

"I have nearly finished it," answered Thurston; "and mean to wind up with a complete exposure of Dr. Hartahorn."

"Don't think of it, my dear friend," exclaimed Copperas, in dismay. "Why, Hartahorn has quoted six pages from my book on *Phlebotomy*."

"Well, I am glad you have mentioned it," said Thurston. "I will take care to pay him a high compliment. By the bye, Professor Gargle never alluded to either of us in his last Course of Lectures."

"No—the same thing struck me," remarked Copperas. "We must run him down. I will attack him in my forthcoming article on *Diabetes;* and you must pronounce him a perfect ignoramus with regard to *Siliagogues*."

"Agreed," said Thurston. "But what about Dr. Sago?'

"Oh! he sent me a brace of grouse with a very polite note last year, and a fine turbot the other day," answered Copperas. "You must let him alone. But if you choose to level a side-blow at that aspiring young fellow Febrifuge, who has just set up his one-horse chaise——"

"No—we won't be hard upon him," interrupted Thurston: "he took off his hat to me the other day."

"Oh! very well," remarked Copperas: "then we'll let him alone."

At this moment the door opened, and a footman entered.

"If you please, sir," said the domestic, "a person named Tomkins—a linen-draper in St. James's Street—wants to know whether you can visit his wife immediately——"

"A linen-draper—Oh! no," interrupted Dr. Thurston, with a contemptuous sneer.

"I should think not indeed," observed Dr. Copperas, pouring out another glass of wine. "What's the matter with the woman?"

"Never mind what's the matter with her," said Thurston. "Tell the husband, William, that I am very sorry—but that Dr. Copperas is engaged with me at present in earnest consultation upon a most difficult case, which I cannot possibly leave."

"Yes, sir," answered the footman: and he quitted the room.

"A paltry five guinea fee, I suppose," said Thurston, as he helped himself to some pigeon-pie.

In a few minutes William reappeared.

"Please, sir," he said, addressing himself to Dr. Copperas, "your servant has just come over to say that one Brisket, a butcher in Piccadilly, has sent for you immediately: his father has fallen down in an apoplectic fit——"

"A butcher indeed!" ejaculated Dr. Copperas. "I wonder what the world is coming to next! Let my servant say that I have been called in by Dr. Thurston in a matter of the utmost importance, and that I am totally unable to attend upon Mr. Brisket."

"Yes, sir," replied the footman: and he again withdrew.

The doctors continued to eat, and drink, and converse as comfortably as if no linen-draper's wife was dangerously ill or no butcher's father in an

apoplectic fit;—and when luncheon was over, Dr. Copperas took his leave to pay his afternoon's round of visits and seek every opportunity of running down Professor Gargle, according to agreement with his friend.

Dr. Thurston was also thinking of going out on *his* tour, when a carriage drove up to the door, and a lady alighted. The footman showed her up to the drawing-room, and then hastened to inform his master that Lady Florimel desired to see him.

"Lady Florimel!" muttered the physician to himself, as he ascended to the drawing-room. "Ah! I recollect: she was one of those Miss Clarendons who used to live in the Edgeware Road, and at whose house——"

But as his musings reached this point his fingers were upon the handle of the drawing-room door; and putting on his most physician-like look and his best professional smile, he entered the apartment.

"I believe that I may have the honour of claiming your ladyship as an acquaintance of former times," he said, bowing with mingled solemnity and urbanity: and he then seated himself near Pauline.

"It is many years since we met, Dr. Thurston," observed the lady: "and the object of my visit is relative to a certain incident—an incident which you cannot possibly have forgotten——"

"Ah! I know what your ladyship means!" said the physician, in a subdued voice of mystery: and his countenance fell.

"Is *he* alive, Dr. Thurston?" asked Pauline, a deep misgiving smiting her at the moment as she observed that sudden alteration in the physician's looks.

"Lady Florimel," was the answer, delivered with much evident uneasiness, "I am utterly unable to give you any information respecting that child—who indeed would be a young man now, if alive——"

"Dr. Thurston," said Pauline, surveying him suspiciously, "what means this singular—this unaccountable—this alarming manner in which you speak of the being confided to your care?"

"Hear me patiently—judge not hastily!" exclaimed Thurston. "The affair may seem suspicious: but I take God to witness mine innocence of any harm or neglect towards that child! It was stolen—stolen from its nurse in its infancy——"

"Stolen!" echoed Pauline. "Ah! and the mother is now anxious to hear tidings concerning him!"

"Her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia!" said Thurston, in a low deep tone: then, perceiving by Lady Florimel's countenance that he was not in error, he continued, "A few months after I removed to May Fair, which is upwards of nineteen years ago—soon after the child was entrusted to me—I saw her Royal Highness riding in her carriage in the park; and I felt assured that she was indeed none other than the Mrs. Mordaunt of the Edgeware Road."

"I do not—I will not—attempt to deny the truth of this discovery," said Pauline. "The religious inviolability with which you have kept so grave and important a secret, Dr. Thurston, convinces me of your honour—your integrity—your conscientiousness; and I beseech your pardon for the momentary manifestation of suspicion which I may have shown. Pray tell me, then, how the unfortunate child was lost."

"A few months after it was entrusted to my care," said the doctor, "the nurse was one day taking it out for the accustomed airing in Hyde Park, when a ferocious-looking man and a boy stole the babe from her. But the man used the most horrible threats. He declared that the child should be reared in the stews of vice and the dens of infamy—that he should be trained in all the hideous ways of demoralization—and when, on the lapse of years, his mind had become thoroughly imbued with these dreadful teachings, he should be restored to me. From that moment, however, no intelligence of the lost one has reached me."

"Oh! this is indeed frightful—frightful," exclaimed Lady Florimel, with a cold shudder. "Let us hope that the unfortunate victim died in his infancy, rather than that the hideous intentions of that monster should have been fulfilled!"

"That dreadful man doubtless thought he was stealing my own child," observed the physician: "for he had conceived a spite against me for reasons which I need not now explain. I never heard of him afterwards. At the time, I gave information to the authorities—circulated hand-bills offering a reward for the recovery of the child—and adopted all imaginable means to regain the hapless lost one. But I forebore from advertising my own name in the matter, for fear the incident should come to the knowledge of the child's mother, whose real name and rank I did not then know. Here is one of the proofs of my statement."

And unlocking a writing-desk, Thurston displayed to Pauline one of the printed bills of which he had just spoken, and which bore the date of June, 1795.

"What am I to do?—what course can I adopt?" asked Lady Florimel, profoundly affected. "I cannot reveal the tremendous truth to the Princess—and I cannot stoop to a falsehood? What is to be done, Dr. Thurston?"

"I know not how to advise your ladyship," said the physician. "But I must inform you that I have many times thought of renewing the inquiry after the lost one. There is at this moment at the head of the London constabulary, a man of extraordinary tact and discernment, and whose fame in his special sphere has never been excelled—scarcely equalled. I allude to Mr. Sampson, the Bow Street officer—an individual whose respectability I believe unimpeachable, and who might be entrusted with the investigation of this delicate matter."

"But it is not necessary to inform him that the subject of the inquiry is the son of her Royal Highness?" said Lady Florimel.

"Assuredly not," returned the physician. "I will represent to Mr. Sampson that the youth, if he be alive, is my own son; and I will proffer a thousand guineas as a reward for his discovery."

"I rely upon your taking these measures without delay," said Pauline. "In the meantime I must reveal the truth to her Royal Highness, suppressing however the dreadful threats which were uttered at the time by the man who stole the child."

"And I will at once repair to Bow Street and obtain an interview with Mr. Lawrence Sampson," observed the physician.

Lady Florimel then took her departure.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

THE scene changes to the office of a bill-broker and discounter in Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. The front door of the house stood open during business-hours—that is to say, from nine till five; and upon the circular ground-glass window of an inner door, which swung either way upon its hinges, was painted the name of "MR. EMMERSON."

In a front office a clerk and a boy were seated at a desk; and a door, with the word "Private" upon it, opened into a well furnished room where Mr. Emmerson himself sate at a table covered with papers. Several handsome pictures were suspended to the walls; and upon a side-table stood a number of sample-bottles, containing various sorts of wine.

Mr. Emmerson was a man of about forty—well dressed—with a diamond pin in his shirt-frill, a handsome gold-chain festooning over his figured silk waistcoat, and a brilliant ring upon each hand. He was dark-haired—of sallow complexion—and hard-featured: his looks denoted the money-grubber and driver of close bargains—while his general appearance indicated flourishing circumstances. He had a splendid house at Clapham—drove to town in his phaeton in the morning—and had his close carriage to fetch him home to dinner in the evening. He had a wife and daughter who dressed elegantly and gave themselves no small amount of airs: and his entertainments at Clapham were of the most magnificent description. For Mr. Emmerson was a man of note in the City: he was already a member of the Common Council, and hoped to be an Alderman shortly.

His connexion, however, lay as much at the West End as in the vicinage of the Royal Exchange—as much with the extravagant young men and dissipated aristocrats who loungod up Bond Street, as with the traders and retailers eastward of Temple Bar. In fact, Mr. Emmerson never refused business when he saw his way pretty clear, no matter who the applicants for money might be, nor from which quarter they came.

Being a rank Tory and a rich man, Mr. Emmerson was of course held up as a person of the highest respectability. No one ventured to breathe a word relative to the slimy ways and usurious practices by which he obtained his wealth. He was a professing Christian—indeed, a very severe one: but the most maligned, persecuted, and contemned Jew never drove harder bargains than this church-going Protestant. He was constantly interlarding his discourse with parenthetic eulogies of our "glorious Constitution," our "admirable laws," and the "blessings of English civilization;"—and there is no doubt he was sincere enough in his encomiums. For it was this same glorious Constitution which created and sustained the awfully vitiated condition of society that led the extravagant man, the dupe, or the struggling tradesman to have recourse to such usurers and money-grubbers as Mr. Emmerson: it was those same admirable laws which gave impunity to his practices, instead of causing him to be whipped at the cart's tail;—and the influence of our blessed civilization was seen in the fact that such a wretch rolled in his carriage and revelled in all the luxuries of life, while the honest working-man was crushed with the fatigues of incessant toil and was half-starved upon the scantiest and poorest fare.

Such, however, was Mr. Emmerson: and now that we have afforded our readers some insight into his character, we will endeavour to do the same in respect to his practices.

We have already said that a clerk and a boy were seated in the front office. The clerk was a young man of about four-and-twenty—tall, well-made, and tolerably good-looking. He dressed with a certain neatness which was entirely devoid of pretension: his linen was always remarkably clean, and denoted the superintendence of some careful female hand. Yet he was not married: but he had an only sister—a beautiful girl of about seventeen—to whom he was devotedly attached, and for whose sake he had hitherto remained single. They were orphans; and in the house where they rented a couple of rooms, they were looked upon with the highest respect by the landlady and their fellow-lodgers. Although the sister obtained a trifle by her skill with the needle, their principal means of support were derived from the brother's salary, which was however only a guinea a-week. Yet Mr. Emmerson insisted that his clerk should always appear well dressed, "in order to do credit to his situation"—and most probably to create a belief that he was handsomely paid by his master!

The boy in the front office was about fourteen, and received seven shillings a-week. *He* also was bound "to look respectable"—in other words, to wear clothes the cost of which would absorb his entire salary, leaving nothing towards helping his parents to keep him.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when we thus introduce our readers to Mr. Emmerson's office in Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street.

Having carefully examined some accounts, the bill-broker suddenly started from his seat and rang a silver hand-bell which stood upon the table. The boy instantaneously answered the summons; and Emmerson said in a cold stern voice, "Tell Mr. Varian to step in." The boy retired—and the next moment the clerk stood in his master's presence.

"Shut the door, Varian," said Emmerson, with a more than usual abruptness of manner.

The clerk instantly saw that something was wrong; and he was glad of the opportunity to turn aside for the moment in order to conceal the confusion which seized upon him. But having closed the door of communication between the two offices, he was again compelled to confront his master, whose eyes were fixed upon him with a coldly searching look that turned the young man's heart into ice to its very core.

"Mr. Varian," said Emmerson, still in that freezing tone which appeared pitiless and relentless: "there is something wrong in your accounts. Have the kindness to explain it:"—and the bill-broker leant back against the mantel-piece with the air of a man who feels that he has got a fellow-creature in his power, and means to crush him.

"Something wrong, sir?" stammered Theodore Varian, now stooping down as if to look at the papers upon the table, but in reality to hide his increasing co

"Yes, sir—and not one error only—but several," continued Mr. Emmerson. "Those papers contain your accounts for petty cash and office disbursements for the last three months; and I discover numerous *mistakes*," he continued, with a malignant emphasis upon the word, "averaging ten shillings a-week. The total amount of these *mistakes* is six pounds sterling."

"I am very sorry, sir—I—I shall be most happy to make the amount good," stammered Theodore, now raising his countenance, which was very pale and had a wild frightened look. "You can deduct from my salary——"

"Stop a moment, sir," exclaimed Mr. Emmerson, sternly. "Finding such errors in the last three months' accounts, I had the curiosity to inspect those of the previous quarter—and also of the quarter before that——"

A subdued moan convulsed the breast of the unhappy young man: and staggering a pace or two, he grasped the back of a chair to prevent himself from falling.

"In fact," continued Mr. Emmerson, his looks and his voice increasing, if possible, in severity, "for a year past, Mr. Varian, you have been making *mistakes* to an agregate amount of twenty-four or twenty-five pounds; and I am sorry to be compelled to add that these errors are so ingeniously mystified in your accounts as to prove that they were *not* accidental. You have been five years in my service—and perhaps, if I were to go over your accounts for the first four years I should discover similar defalcations to those which characterise the last."

"No, sir—on my honour, you will not!" exclaimed Theodore, with an earnestness that brought the colour to his pale cheeks for an instant.

"Ah! then they are not mistakes," said Emmerson, with a sneer; "and you admit that they are defalcations—wilful plunderings?"

"Sir, I cannot—I will not attempt to deny it," returned Theodore, speaking in a low voice and with profound agitation of manner. "I will not add falsehood to my other offence—an offence to which I plead guilty, and for which I implore your mercy."

"Then, sir, you confess that you have been systematically robbing me for a year past?" observed the bill-broker. "But, thank God! we live in a country where the laws are so admirably contrived and so justly administered, under the guarantee of our blessed Constitution, that a master can punish his faithless servant."

"I hope, sir—I implore—I beseech, that you will not ruin me," said Varian, bursting into tears and clasping his hands in the agony of earnest entreaty. "Thousands and thousands of pounds of your money, sir, have passed through my hands—and the extreme of my defalcations is the amount you have named."

"But he who steals a penny, sir, will steal a pound," replied Emmerson, sternly: "and I owe to the special providence of that heaven which watches over me, the timely discovery of your misdeeds."

"Pray grant me your attention for a few minutes, sir," exclaimed the unhappy Theodore; "and do not—oh! do not make up your mind to any sudden harshness. I take to witness, sir, that heaven whereof you have spoken, that I am not naturally bad. Inquire of my landlady—inquire of my fellow-lodgers and neighbours—inquire of the tradesmen with whom I deal—and you will find, sir, that I am neither extravagant nor unsteady. I live with the strictest economy—and never have I once been late in my attendance at your office. But last winter, sir, my sister had a long and severe illness—my poor sister," continued the young man, large tears rolling down his cheeks, "who will be heart-broken if she hears of my disgrace! She was at the point of death, sir—and I was compelled to obtain a nurse for her, as well as constant medical attendance. You remember, sir, that I besought you to grant me a month's leave of absence—in which case I should myself have nursed her. But you told me that if I quitted you for any cause save illness on my own part, I might remain away altogether. Well, sir, my sister recovered, thanks to the attentions by which I surrounded her: but I was ruined by the expenses. I set aside half my salary to pay the debts thus incurred: and my poor sister and I lived upon ten shillings a week. Ah! sir, it was hard to see her want necessaries, at a time when she required strengthening aliment and every comfort. I used to tell her that I dined with friends, while I in reality ate a piece of dry bread, in order to afford her a sufficiency of food. But the surgeon clamoured for his bill—and then, as my clothes grew shabby, you told me that unless I could contrive to appear respectable in your service, I must leave. It was under all these distressing circumstances, Mr. Emmerson, that I became a defaulter; and the dread of detection sharpened my otherwise inexperienced ingenuity in playing the deceiver and falsifying the accounts with so much apparent cunning I have now told you all—and I throw myself upon your mercy."

"Mercy, indeed!" echoed the bill-broker, with a scornful chuckle. "What would become of this vast emporium of commerce—this mart for the merchandize of the universe—this centre of civilization—if the law did not protect property and demand the surrender of those who offend against it?"

"Oh! sir," exclaimed Varian, in an imploring voice, "mercy, leniency, and forbearance are the elements of a true condition of civilization!"

"But I owe a duty to society, sir," rejoined the bill-broker, sharply: "and that duty must be discharged! Speaking, however, of your sister, she seemed quite well when she called the other day to bring you a letter."

"Did you not observe that she was pale and delicate?" inquired Varian. "But doubtless you took little notice of her——"

"What is her name?" demanded Emmerson, abruptly.

"Ariadne, sir," was the reply.

"Ah! a classic name—eh?" observed the bill-broker, with an accent of sarcasm: then, in a different tone and with musing manner, he said, "She is a well-looking girl—with pleasing manners and modest appearance—a very beautiful girl, indeed——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Theodore, a ray of hope now gleaming in unto his soul,—"do not, then, break the heart of this poor friendless girl whose merits you have not failed to perceive! She is wholly and entirely dependent upon me, Mr. Emmerson—and the shock produced by my dishonour would prove a mortal blow to poor Ariadne!"

"But you should have thought of all this at

first, Mr. Varian," said the bill-broker, his voice again becoming stern and his manner severe. "Do you know to what you have exposed yourself?"

"Too well—too well, sir," cried Theodore, the gleam of hope suddenly extinguishing in his breast and despair once again resuming its place.

"It is in my power to call in a constable," proceeded Emmerson, "and give you into custody. You would then be dragged before the magistrate—committed to Newgate—tried in due course—and sentenced to a heavy punishment. But this would not be all. With a blasted character—a ruined reputation—your sister in the workhouse, or perhaps on the town——"

"Heavens, sir—do not continue this appalling picture!" cried Varian, shivering and shuddering from head to foot, while his countenance became ghastly with the terror of his excruciating thoughts. "In the name of God spare me!—in mercy spare me!"—and he fell upon his knees before his master.

"There is one condition—and only one, upon which I will spare you!" responded Emmerson, in a low deep voice, while his lips trembled and his own cheek blanched at the tremendous turpitude of the thought to which his ungovernable passions nevertheless compelled him to give utterance.

"And that one condition, sir?" exclaimed Theodore, joyfully catching at this return of hope. "What is it?" he demanded, still kneeling.

"That you surrender your sister to my arms," was the reply.

"Monster!" ejaculated the young man, springing to his feet as if he were suddenly electrified. "But no—I did not hear aright—I have done you an injustice—or else you are endeavouring to put my principles to the test——"

"Enough of this ranting, sir!" exclaimed Emmerson, abruptly. "You have heard my decision—I never joke—I care nothing what your principles may be outside the doors of this office. Choose therefore at once:—is it to be your sister to my arms, or yourself to Newgate?"

Theodore Varian gazed upon his master with the bewilderment and wildness of one who is ready to go mad with ineffable anguish. He could scarcely believe it possible that the cold, phlegmatic, church-going man of business could either conceal so much burning lust beneath the mask of hypocrisy, or so far falsify all his professions of strict morality and veneration of the law by daring to propound so tremendous a crime. But the longer he gazed upon his master, the more convinced did he become that such was indeed the fact: and almost heart-broken, the young man fell upon a seat and burst into a perfect convulsion of uncontrollable anguish.

Stern, pitiless, and without remorse, did the money-grubbing Emmerson—that satyr in the garb of sanctimoniousness and respectability—contemplate Theodore Varian. He hated the young man, because he knew him to be fundamentally virtuous and well-principled, despite the peculations of which he had been guilty: and, on the other hand, he cherished an insatiable desire to possess the lovely Aviadne. Moreover, Emmerson could not help feeling how really mean, despicable, and false he himself was, although no man could proclaim any definite misdeed against him,—in comparison with Theodore Varian, notwitstanding the defalcations which, if published to the world, would blacken his character for ever. Therefore was it that Mr. Emmerson experienced a fiend's malignant joy at having gotten the young man so completely into his power.

"Is it possible, sir," inquired Theodore, the first strong fever of his harrowing anguish having somewhat subsided,—"is it possible that you mean what you say?"

"It is quite possible—it is probable:—nay, more—it is true," was the dread response. "And let us not bandy words—for I have well weighed all the consequences of my proposal. You may think to unmask me: but who would believe so outrageous a tale against a man of my respectability and austere morals—especially when that tale is told by my clerk who has robbed me? Any magistrate—any judge in the land—any jury, in fine, would tell you that you only aggravated your enormity by so preposterous an attempt to blacken my character, which is unimpeachable. Then again, you may think to escape from London, taking your sister with you: but I would spend a thousand pounds to advertise your personal description in such a manner that no disguise of dress and no feigned name should protect you against discovery. Choose, then, whether it shall be Newgate on the one hand—or a compliance with my conditions on the other. If the former," added Mr. Emmerson, laying his hand upon the silver bell, "the boy shall fetch a constable at once: if the latter, then I give you three days to prepare your sister for the sacrifice which she is to make of her honour in order to save your's."

Every word of this diabolical address struck like a sledge-hammer upon the head and pierced like a fiery arrow to the heart of the unhappy Theodore. He saw the truth of all the cold, measured, fiendish calculations of his master: and it was a wonder that he did not go raving mad then and there! But he was too young in the ways of the world, and naturally of too sanguine and buoyant a disposition, to despair altogether: and in the latter alternative offered him, he had three days' delay. How much could be done—how much might transpire in his favour—in three days? At all events, he would have that period to deliberate more calmly than he could possibly do now: and then, his master might relent!

"Well, sir—what is your decision?" demanded Emmerson, after a pause, and keeping his hand still upon the bell.

"The latter alternative," was Varian's reply, delivered in a hollow voice and with ghastly countenance.

"Be it so," said Emmerson. "And now take a glass of wine—for you must not return to your desk with those looks that will make the boy suspect something."

Thus speaking, the money-lender filled a glass from one of the sample-bottles, and handed it to Theodore, who drank its contents with avidity: for he did indeed experience the want of a stimulus at that moment.

Then, having somewhat composed his looks, he returned into the front office.

A few minutes afterwards the Earl of Curzon called, and was immediately shown by the boy into the bill-broker's private room.

"Well, Emmerson," said the Earl, flinging him-

self negligently upon a chair and tapping the toe of his boot with his riding-whip, as he stretched out his legs in a *nonchalant* manner,—"any news in the City?"

"Nothing particular, my lord. Only a very animated discussion yesterday in the Common Council. I presume your lordship has read my speech in this morning's paper?"

"Upon my honour, Emmerson, I had not time. What was the discussion about?" inquired the Earl, languidly.

"On the propriety of erecting a new pump in Aldgate, my lord," answered Emmerson. "The matter has created immense excitement in the City, I can assure you; and the hall was crowded to excess. Such eloquence was never put forth on any former occasion: it was more than enough to make even the House of Commons jealous. And I flatter myself that I came out pretty strong in denouncing the job. I spoke for three hours without stopping. The Lord Mayor listened all the time with his eyes shut—so deep was the impression that I made. Mr. Under-sheriff Fire—a perky cock-sparrow little fellow, who abounds in conceit and fancies himself a great orator—endeavoured to answer me: but he made a miserable failure. Then Mr. Richard Baylor—a terrible prosy old owl, who puts himself up as an authority in all City matters and sometimes attempts to be facetious—followed on the same side as Fire: but it was all to no purpose. I carried my motion against the new pump by an overwhelming majority; and afterwards received the congratulations of everybody on 'Change for my spirited conduct."

"Well," said Curzon, who had listened with exemplary patience to this long narrative, in order to put the bill-broker into a good humour, "you did wonders, certainly. But is your conduct spirited enough to lend me some money?"

"Very likely it is, my lord," said Emmerson, smiling. "How much do you want?—for how long?—and on what security?"

"A couple of thousand guineas—for six months—and on my promissory note," answered the Earl, replying to the queries with categorical brevity.

"But your lordship has already a great many liabilities," observed Emmerson.

"A few debts—nothing to speak of—that's all," said the nobleman, carelessly.

"How, a few debts?" exclaimed the money-lender, looking hard at the Earl. "And no bills of exchange—no acceptances—already in the market?"

"Not one, on my oath!" cried Curzon, emphatically.

"Not one?—not a single one?" remarked Emmerson, apparently staggered by the Earl's declaration. "Pray reflect, my lord. No accommodation bills to serve a friend——"

"I defy you, my dear fellow, to bring such a folly home to me," exclaimed Curzon. "I have been silly and reckless enough as it is, without having to plead guilty to such downright madness. Once for all, then, I tell you that I have no bills out. If anybody has told you that I have, it was an atrocious falsehood: and if any have been brought to you to discount, they are forgeries. Now will you believe me?"

"As a matter of course, my lord," responded Emmerson, still surveying the Earl with singular and almost suspicious looks.

"Why do you regard me in this manner?" demanded the nobleman. "I tell you again that I am too old a bird upon town to accept accommodation-bills for anybody. I want accommodation myself, and could not think of giving it to others. It is true I have been asked to join friends on several occasions in raising money: but I have always refused. General Beechey asked me some time ago—young George Sefton, who was killed by Dysart in the duel, asked me—Dysart himself, who, by the bye, was arrested yesterday morning and lodged in Newgate, has asked me—Malpas has asked me——"

"Ah! Colonel Malpas has asked your lordship?" said the bill-broker. "And you invariably refused—Malpas and all?"

"I invariably refused," returned the nobleman. "Beechey's difficulties were well known to me—young Sefton had not a penny piece to bless himself with—Dysart is a thorough scamp—and I have not a very high opinion of Malpas. I therefore refused them all."

"Your lordship has certainly acted with much prudence," observed Mr. Emmerson, resuming his wonted cold business-like tone and manner. "Be kind enough to draw up the promissory note at six months," he continued, taking a bill-stamp from a portfolio; "and I will write you a cheque for seventeen hundred guineas. Your lordship will draw the note for two thousand."

"What! you are going to charge me three hundred for discount?" exclaimed the nobleman. "It is far too much. I can obtain the accommodation elsewhere, at a much cheaper rate."

"Then pray apply elsewhere, my lord," said Emmerson coolly.

"Be it so," observed the Earl, rising. "Good afternoon:"—and, taking up his hat, he was walking towards the door.

"One moment, my lord," exclaimed the bill-broker, who was now perfectly satisfied that the nobleman's need was not so desperate as to induce him to pay an exorbitant discount for the money he required. "How much will you give?"

"A couple of hundred guineas for the accommodation—and not a farthing more," replied the Earl of Curzon.

"Well, I suppose I must accommodate your lordship," said the money-lender;—and he sate down to write a draft upon his banker.

The Earl filled up the promissory note—received the cheque—and withdrew, humming an opera-air. The moment he had retired, Emmerson opened a cash-box, took forth several bills of exchange, and compared the writing of the acceptance with that of the promissory note just signed by the nobleman.

"Yes—they are unquestionably forgeries," he muttered to himself, as he returned the bills to the cash-box.

A few minutes afterwards the boy entered to announce Colonel Malpas.

"Ah! my dear Emmerson," said the visitor, with his usual drawing-room drawl and his blandest smile: "always to be found—eh? Well, what news in the City?" he inquired, sinking lackadaisycally down upon a seat and caressing his brown moustache.

"No particular news, Colonel Malpas," replied the bill-broker: "unless it be that I have just had the Earl of Curzon with me."

"Ah! indeed," said the Colonel, by no means discomfitted at this announcement. "And what did he want?"

"Money—money, to be sure," answered the bill-broker, contemplating his visitor with searching, penetrating eyes, as if to read into the depths of his very soul. "No one ever comes to this office except for money—although *some* have different ways of obtaining it to what others have."

"No doubt, my dear fellow," observed Malpas, caressing his moustache with infinite composure. "Different kinds of security—eh? That's what you mean, I suppose?"

"But some securities are valid, Colonel Malpas," rejoined Emmerson, a malignant smile appearing faintly upon his lip,—"while others are mere waste paper—or worse—being downright forgeries."

"Well, I suppose you must run these kinds of risks now and then," remarked Malpas, still unmoved—and indeed not noticing the intentness with which the money-lender was surveying him. "But what do you do in such cases—forgeries, for instance?"

"If the man is a poor devil from whom I can never hope to get a farthing," replied Emmerson, "I send him to Newgate and make an example of him, for the benefit of society. But if he is a man not without resources, I give him four-and-twenty hours to take up the bills and save his honour."

"A very good plan too," observed Malpas, quite carelessly.

"I am glad you approve of it, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, in a severe tone: "because it is the very course I am about to adopt towards yourself."

"Towards me! What the devil do you mean?" demanded Colonel Malpas, with apparently so

natural an air of mingled indignation and surprise, that if it were assumed no dissimulation was ever more perfect.

"Yes, sir—towards you!" echoed the money-lender. "You have had three thousand guineas of my good money——"

"True! And a thousand guineas' worth of very wretched wine," interrupted Malpas, with a sneer: "nothing to be compared to the samples upon the mantel-piece, which I tasted. But for the money and the wine, amounting only to four thousand guineas, you hold bills for the extent of five thousand."

"Which bills, sir," remarked Emmerson, astonished at what he considered to be the Colonel's bare-faced assurance, "purport to be the acceptances of the Earl of Curzon—whereas they are all forgeries!"

"Forgeries! You lie, Mr. Emmerson!" exclaimed the Colonel, becoming very red—and then as suddenly turning pale as death;—but it might have been with anger and excitement, just as well as with conscious guilt. "Or if the Earl of Curzon says they are forgeries, *he* lies!"

"Your effrontery is intolerable, sir!" remarked Emmerson. "Will you tell me that *these* acceptances are in the same writing as *this?*" he demanded, taking the bills from his cash-box with one hand, and holding up the Earl's promissory note in the other.

"Certainly there is a difference—yes—a marked difference," stammered Malpas, now becoming deadly pale and remaining so. "I can't understand it—there is some unaccountable mistake ——Good God! what can it mean? But did you tell Curzon——"

"I told him nothing, sir," replied Emmerson. "He of his own accord stated to me that you had some time ago asked him to join you in raising money, but that he refused."

"Perfectly correct," exclaimed Malpas. "But nevertheless——"

And he stopped short, in a bewilderment that was evidently very far from feigned.

"Is it possible, Colonel, that you have been made a dupe by some party?" inquired Emmerson, now suspecting that the hint which he thus threw out might after all be the correct solution of the mystery. "Because, in that case," he continued, "the best thing to do will be at once to take the whole business before the Lord Mayor——"

"Not for worlds!" cried Malpas, becoming still more agitated: and he trembled from head to foot as if suddenly stricken with the palsy.

"Then what *do* you mean me to understand?—and what course am I to pursue?" demanded Emmerson, all his suspicions returning in the Colonel's disfavour.

"I know not how to answer you—I am bewildered—amazed—astounded——"

"But are the bills forgeries—or are they not?" inquired Emmerson.

"I can hardly bring myself to believe that they are," replied the Colonel; "and yet circumstances tend to prove that they must be."

"Then let us go to the Lord Mayor—unless you can pay me the amount, or give me both satisfactory explanations and securities."

"The Lord Mayor! No—no—ten thousand times no!" yelled forth the wretched Malpas: then, suddenly over-mastering the violence of his emotions, he said, "Mr. Emmerson, I can give you no explanations at present—I must see a certain person in the first instance——"

"And perhaps leave the country," added the bill-broker, abruptly. "No, sir—I am not to be treated in this way. I have a large sum of money at stake—and you cannot leave this office until we arrive at some satisfactory understanding. In plain terms, Colonel Malpas, you have played your part admirably—I believed you for a few moments, really fancying that you might have been made a dupe—but I shall be trifled with no longer. Either give me security—or I shall summon a constable."

"Good heavens! you cannot mean what you threaten, Emmerson!" cried the Colonel, in dismay. "You know not the ruin you will cause—the tremendous exposure which will be the result! I shudder at the bare idea——"

"And every guilty man shudders, Colonel Malpas, when entangled in the meshes of those admirable laws which support the frame-work of our beautiful system of society. Now, sir—do you wish to become better acquainted with these laws? or will you give me satisfaction—ample satifaction relative to those forged bills?"

"Emmerson," said the Colonel, greatly distressed and fearfully agitated, "grant me the twenty-four hours' license which you ere now assured me you are wont to accord under such circumstances——"

"Not an hour—not a minute, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, sternly. "This is a peculiar occurrence—it is not an ordinary one—and there is no possible guarantee against your quitting the country. I must give you into custody—and then perhaps your friends will come forward to assist in hushing up the matter."

Thus speaking, the bill-broker laid his hand upon the silver bell.

"Stop—one moment!" gasped the Colonel, now reduced to a wretched plight. "If I trust you with a great secret—a very great secret, Emmerson—the secret, in fact, of these bills—will you swear to guard it most religiously—most sacredly?"

"I will," was the response. "All I need is a satisfactory explanation——"

"And I can give it—I can give it!" exclaimed the Colonel, his form quivering with nervous excitement. "I will prove to you, through the lips of *another*, that I am innocent—guiltless——"

"And will that *other* pay the amount if you cannot?" asked Emmerson.

"Most assuredly. The secret will be in your keeping—and I tell you beforehand that it is a strange and an interesting one."

"I am to understand, then," said the money-broker, "that if you do not take up the bills in due course, I am to make use of this promised secret in order to enforce payment from some other party?"

"Precisely so," answered the Colonel: "but if I do pay you out of my own resources, you are to keep the secret inviolable, as if it were one entrusted to you by a visitor from the tomb!"

"I agree. But when is this explanation to take place?—and how will it be managed?"

"If you will meet me to-morrow evening at eight o'clock," observed Malpas, after some few moments' reflection, "I will conduct you to a place where, by

concealing yourself, you can overhear everything that passes between me and that *other* person to whom I have alluded."

"And where shall I meet you?"

"Will you call for me at my own house in Great Marlborough Street?"

"At a quarter before eight I will be there," answered Emmerson.

"I shall expect you," rejoined Malpas: and he then took his leave, in a condition of mind far more painful than the reader can well imagine.

CHAPTER I.

THE MARRIAGE.

In George Street, leading into Hanover Square, stands St. George's church, which is the most fashionable temple of Hymen within the precincts of the metropolis. It is aristocratic in appearance as well as by repute,—not even the sanctity of religion and the meekness of the Christian faith having been able to rescue it from the intrusive pomp, ostentation, and vain parade of the frivolous, heartless, and empty-headed upper classes. The panels in front of the galleries are emblazoned with the names of the "noble lords," "right honourables," and "honourables," who have from time to time filled the office of churchwardens: the decorations of the pews show that they are intended for the ease and comfort of the "higher orders;" and the general aspect of the interior is "eminently fashionable."

An arched recess, with a painted window, enshrines the altar, which is set in a sculptured frame-work. The window is essentially of the Romish sacred architecture; and this effect is heightened into an appearance of positive Catholicism, not only by the representation of the Virgin and Child, the Dove, and the Crucifixion, in the stained glass, but also by the magnificent picture of the Last Supper behind the communion table.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, September 25th, 1814, that a tall, slender, handsome young gentleman, dressed in deep mourning, slowly ascended the steps of the portico and entered St. George's Church, the doors of which were already opened. His countenance was pale and full of a deep melancholy: there was something peculiarly touching and profoundly interesting in its expression;—and amiability, goodness, and generosity were at the same time blended in every trait.

On entering the church, the young gentleman proceeded straight to the vestry, where the clerk was seated at a table poring over one of the huge parish registers.

"Good morning, Mr. Malvern—or Sir Valentine Malvern, as I suppose I ought to call you," said the clerk, rising from his seat and making a low bow.

"It is true that my friends wish me to assume the family honours, as they have already persuaded me to take the management of the estate," observed the young gentleman, with a profound sigh: "but I cannot endure the thought of adopting a course which after all might prove an usurpation."

"I wish that I could give you any hope, sir, of your lamented father's restoration," said the clerk. "I had known him for many years—ever since he first came to live in Hanover Square—and I have therefore known you also, Sir Valentine, from your childhood——"

"Do not address me as if I were already in possession of the title, my good friend," interrupted Malvern. "I have vowed to suffer a year to pass before I will consider my father as really dead—although, to speak candidly, Mr. Jackson, I feel that I am hoping against hope's extinction, and therefore in very desperation!"

"Alas! yes, Mr. Malvern—since it is thus that you choose to be still called," observed the clerk: "so mysterious a disappearance—happening all on a sudden, and without leaving a trace behind—cannot be accounted for otherwise than by the supposition that accident or foul play must have overtaken the unfortunate gentleman. If it was an accident, sir, some clue would have been discovered: and therefore——"

"Proceed not, Jackson—'tis too dreadful to reflect upon!" interrupted Malvern: then, as if to divert his thoughts from the melancholy topic, he said, "Have you found the entry in the register of births?"

"I have, sir," replied Jackson. "You were born on the 3rd of July, 1792—and therefore you are a little past twenty-two years old. I suppose your trustees require official proof of your having attained your majority?"

"Precisely so," answered Valentine. "It is a mere matter of form, inasmuch as they are relatives of mine and know full well my exact age. But still it is necessary to have everything regular; and therefore you must give me a certificate."

"To be sure, Mr. Malvern," returned the clerk: and he proceeded to fill up the usual form, which he handed to Valentine. "By the bye, sir," he observed, "we are going to have a wedding in a few minutes. I did not know last evening, when I met you in the Square and you told me that you required your baptismal certificate,—I did not know, I say, that I should have to visit the church for another purpose this morning. Not that marriages are rare at St. George's, heaven knows. Quite the contrary! But it was only late last evening that I received the intimation that there was one for this morning: and being a special license, I suppose it is rather a hurried affair," added the clerk, in a mysterious whisper: for he was evidently a man of garrulous propensities, although of kind disposition and inoffensive nature.

"Who are the happy pair?" asked Valentine, not choosing to offend the worthy man by cutting short the discourse abruptly, but in reality experiencing not the slightest interest in the question which he had just put.

"Mr. Horace Sackville and Miss Venetia Trelawney," replied the clerk. "Miss Trelawney, you know, is a celebrated beauty—indeed, the most lovely woman that ever was seen. So I am informed, at least: for I have never seen her, to my knowledge."

"Nor I either," observed Valentine: then, impelled by some undefinable feeling of curiosity, he said, "I shall remain and witness the ceremony."

"Ah! sir," remarked Jackson, shaking his head solemnly, "these fashionable marriages that take

place in this church, often set me a-thinking in a strange way. I have seen young and beautiful creatures almost dragged as it were to the altar, to bestow their hands upon drivelling dotards old enough to be their grandfathers; and I have afterwards watched their career in the world with great interest and anxiety. The wives in these cases always turned out wrong sooner or later: in nine cases out of ten there have been elopements, crim. cons., divorces, and other disgraceful scenes. Then, again, I have beheld young bridegrooms leading withered old women to that altar—spendthrifts, who having run through their own fortunes, obtain by marriage an opportunity of running through the fortunes of others. Yes, sir—I have seen many, many marriages in this church—but few, very few indeed that were for real love and have led to happiness. To tell you the truth, Mr. Malvern, I don't think the upper classes, generally speaking, have got any hearts at all—and if they have, they're seldom or never in the right place."

"Most assuredly, the English Aristocracy is not distinguished for morality, generosity, or intelligence," observed Valentine.

At this moment the clergyman entered the vestry; and Valentine being well acquainted with him, they conversed together for a few minutes. But as the time for the ceremony was now at hand, Malvern retired into the church where he entered a pew near the altar.

At that moment there were no other spectators present: but scarcely had Valentine taken his seat, when the Earl of Curzon made his appearance in the church and walked slowly up the aisle. He was pale and evidently much annoyed, although he endeavoured to conceal his vexation. Observing Valentine, with whom he was well acquainted, he entered the same pew and sate down by his side. While they were conversing in a subdued tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon arrived—and also walking up the aisle, he noticed the Earl and Malvern, whom he immediately joined. His looks were perfectly good-humoured: and by the very first remark he made, he showed that he had not come thither by accident, nor was a stranger to the ceremony about to take place.

"Are you interested at all, Malvern, in Miss Trelawney's marriage?" he inquired, with a smile.

"How can I be?" asked the young gentleman. "I do not know her—nor do I believe that I have ever seen her. I came to the church on some business with the clerk; and hearing of what was about to take place, I remained to witness the ceremony."

"How did you know of it?" inquired the Earl of Curzon, in a whisper to Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Oh! from some secret information," answered the baronet. "How did you?"

"Also from some secret source," was the Earl's response. "You do not appear to care about it at all."

"What is the use?" said Huntingdon. "Sackville is a lucky dog—that is all I can say. I shall offer him and Venetia my congratulations. But you seem to be particularly chagrined."

"I did not think it possible that the matter could have ended thus," replied Curzon, petulantly. "But here they come!"

The doors at the entrance were thrown open as the Earl was speaking; and the whispered colloquy, which Valentine Malvern did not overhear, was thus cut short.

The bridal-party entered the church. It consisted of Venetia Trelawney, Horace Sackville, Mrs. Arbuthnot, her daughter Penelope, Miss Bathurst, Dr. Copperas, and two or three other ladies and gentlemen — all the arrangements having been made under the supervision of Miss Bathurst, who, be it remembered, was Horace Sackville's aunt.

As the reader may suppose, Venetia looked transcendently beautiful in her virgin raiment. Her countenance was pale: her looks were downcast—and the long fringes that veiled her deep blue eyes, rested upon her cheeks. A gentle melancholy and soft bashfulness blended in the expression of her features: but she seemed far lovelier at this moment of timidity and embarrassment, than when radiant with the smiles of triumph or dignified in the presence of insult. Above her forehead, within the elegant white bonnet, lay her rich auburn hair, of velvet smoothness, and having the appearance of dark gold as the prismatic light from the painted window fell upon it. The virgin drapery displayed all the grand contours and flowing outlines of her shape—that form in which voluptuous fulness was so admirably blended with symmetrical proportion. Nor was the dress itself whiter than the bosom of which it allowed transient glimpses, and the swelling volume of which gave such richness to her figure in a profile view and rendered the waist more delicate than even it really was.

Horace Sackville experienced a joy which beamed in his looks; and a disinterested beholder would have thought that so handsome and elegant a young man was indeed well fitted to lead so charming a bride to the altar. Miss Bathurst and Penelope, who officiated as bridemaids, were both beautifully dressed—as was also Mrs. Arbuthnot: and Dr. Copperas, proud of the honour of being selected to give the bride away, whispered to Miss Bathurst that his only regret was that "so eminent a man and shrewd an observer of human nature as Dr. Thurston was not present to enrich his phrenological knowledge by contemplating the countenances of the happy couple."

On passing towards the altar, Sackville noticed Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the Earl of Curzon, to whom he bowed—and he could not prevent a gleam of triumph from appearing for a moment upon his countenance. The baronet returned his salutation with friendly familiarity—the Earl with cold hauteur. Venetia looked neither to the right nor to the left, and did not therefore observe them.

Not only, however, was she noticed by her two unsuccessful suitors, but also by Valentine Malvern, who started on catching the first glimpse of her countenance—for it instantaneously struck him that he had seen her before. The where, the when, and the circumstances, also flashed to his mind in a moment: and he contemplated her with a more earnest attention as she passed up the central avenue of the church. There was a mingled expression of astonishment and doubt in his features, as he thus followed her with his eyes: and when she reached the altar and her countenance was no longer visible, her back being now turned towards

him, he said in a low whisper to the Earl of Curzon, "Is that Miss Trelawney?"

"It is," replied the nobleman.

"Then I must be mistaken," thought Valentine to himself: but resuming his seat in the pew and bending his head forward, he gave way to the reflections that were now uppermost in his mind.

The clergyman and clerk had in the meantime taken their places at the communion table; and the marriage ceremony commenced. Scarcely had it begun when two more individuals entered the church—one taking his place somewhat noisily in a pew, and the other planting himself in the remotest angle of the sacred edifice. The former was Captain Tash, whose nose seemed to indicate that his morning draught at the *Green Dragon* had been none of the weakest: the latter was his man Robin, who appeared quite astonished at finding himself inside a church—especially the most fashionable one of the West End.

The ceremony was completed—and Venetia became the wife of Horace Sackville. The happy pair received the congratulations of those who belonged to the bridal party; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, advancing with a frank affability, requested permission to offer his congratulations likewise. As for the Earl of Curzon—he remained in the pew for a few moments longer: then suddenly prompted by some thought, he followed the baronet towards the altar.

Venetia had received the congratulations of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the same spirit in which they were evidently offered: but the moment her eyes met the looks of the Earl of Curzon, a flush of displeasure appeared upon her countenance.

"I congratulate you, Mrs. Sackville, upon this happy occasion," he said, in a low tone and with accents that were full of a malignant irony: then, turning abruptly away, as Venetia drew herself up haughtily, he took Horace aside for an instant—muttering in his ear, "I congratulate *you* also upon your marriage with one who has abandoned herself both to Leveson and the Prince—and on the same evening too!"

He then turned away and walked out of the church, followed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Sackville, who was staggered for a moment, almost instantaneously recovered himself; and giving his arm to his lovely bride, he led her towards the vestry, where the register was to be signed. This ceremony being completed, the party quitted the church.

Two carriages were waiting at the door to convey the company to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street, where an elegant repast was prepared. Lady Wenlock, the Honourable George Macnamara, and Lieutenant Apsley of the Guards, who had been invited, were already there; and the usual healths were drunk. Dr. Copperas, in making a speech, observed that "it was assuredly the happiest morning he had ever passed in all his life, with the one exception of the memorable and never-to-be-forgotten day on which he first had the honour of being introduced to that extraordinary man—the ornament of his profession—Dr. Thurston."

The breakfast was over—a footman announced that the carriage was in readiness—and Sackville handed his bride into the vehicle. The serious-looking old livery-servant and Jessica were seated in the rumble behind: the trunks were packed upon the roof—and, all being in readiness, the postilion drove away at a rapid rate.

The happy couple were bound for Brighton, where they intended to pass a few days. They spoke but little until the travelling-carriage was beyond the southern outskirts of London: but they sate with their hands united in each other's clasp, and exchanging fond looks. For Horace adored and worshipped the charming creature who had become his bride: and Venetia was not indifferent to the fervid attachment, the personal appearance, and the elegant manners of him who was now her husband.

"Did not Curzon whisper something annoying in your ears, Horace?" inquired Venetia at length, a slight flush appearing upon her countenance. "Tell me what he said," she urged, seeing that Sackville hesitated to reply.

"He said that he was aware of your visit to Lord Leveson and also to the Prince on the same evening," answered Horace.

"And so were you," replied Venetia, laughing. "But you were also acquainted with the particulars of these interviews and the results of each."

"I was nevertheless startled at the moment, my angel," said Horace: "because I could not possibly conceive how the Earl came to learn that you had paid those visits."

"He employed spies to follow me," said Venetia, her musical laugh sounding deliciously upon her husband's ears, although he felt deeply indignant at the announcement which excited her gaiety. "I discovered it all yesterday: his spies were even in the church ere now. But let us converse on other matters for the present: and I will tell you all about the spies on some future occasion."

"Be it so, dearest," said Horace, as he gazed with inexpressible devotion on the lovely creature who was now his own.

Meantime, Valentine Malvern had returned to his own house at No. 20, Hanover Square, his mind filled with the image of Venetia: and he even reproached himself frequently during the remainder of the day, for allowing the incidents of the morning to divert his thoughts at all from the painful topic on which they were hitherto wont to be settled—namely, the unaccounted-for disappearance of his father, Sir Archibald.

With regard to the happy couple, we might record all the tender and interesting things which they said to each other during the ride to Brighton,—we might say how they reached that fashionable watering-place at a late hour in the evening,—how they took up their quarters at the principal hotel,—and how they both longed, with a secret rapture which they mutually concealed, for the arrival of the moment that was to crown their wedded bliss. But we must not dwell upon those details, nor prolong unnecessarily this portion of our narrative. If, however, we may penetrate for a single instant into the nuptial chamber, where Jessica hastily divested her mistress of her apparel, we might observe that never, never had Venetia appeared more transcendently lovely than when, with blushing cheeks and heaving bosom, she heard her faithful attendant expatiate upon the handsome appearance of the bridegroom. We might add

that in the meantime Horace himself was waiting with all possible anxiety in an adjacent dressing-room;—and we might close our observations by stating that when at length Jessica had withdrawn, and the happy pair were clasped in each other's arms, they both forgot any disagreeable circumstances which pertained to their union, and abandoned themselves to those delights which Milton did not deem unworthy to be apostrophised and honoured in his immortal verse!

CHAPTER LI.

AN ARISTOCRATIC PAIR.

It was about noon—on the day of the marriage just described; and a beautiful lady was lounging negligently upon a sofa in a handsomely-furnished apartment at a mansion in Grosvenor Street.

She was about six-and-twenty years of age—of middle height—and of dark but clear complexion. There was a peculiar beauty in the full lips of bright scarlet; and these, together with her flashing eyes and decisively pencilled brows, indicated the warmth of her temperament.

Her countenance was of an oriental style of loveliness, irradiated as it were with a dark yet glowing lustre. Her hair was not precisely of sable blackness, but had that purple and glossy hue which made it shining, soft, and smooth as velvet: its luxuriance was remarkable—and, the lady's toilette not having as yet been achieved, the heavy tresses hung in massive clusters upon the firm, plump, and polished shoulders. Her profile was softly acquiline, without anything approaching to prominency of feature, save in respect to the lips, which were luscious and full, but not coarse. The teeth which they revealed, when parting in smiles that breathed a tender sensuousness, were of pearly whiteness;—and her looks were brilliant and animated, with a provocative expression of subdued wantonness.

Her bust was purely sculptural—the chest being somewhat narrow, and the bosoms by no means exuberant, but of sufficient developement to mark the statue-like contours of her shape. They were well detached, rising in perfect hemispheres, and sustaining the beauty of their proportions by their own firmness; for at the moment we are describing this lady, she wore neither corset nor artificial means of compressure. An elegant morning-wrapper was drawn loosely around her form, and confined at the waist by a broad ribbon negligently tied.

Her arms were not stout, but most symmetrically modelled; and nothing could exceed the beauty of her hand, with the pellucid nails seeming like supporting arches to the taper fingers, and of a rosy tint. Her feet were long and narrow; the ankles were not too slight, but perfectly rounded, and swelling gradually upward into a fine development of limb. Passion was in her looks—but a voluptuous and dreamy langour was in her attitude as she reclined upon the sofa.

The oriental duskiness of her complexion—appearing like the softest and most delicate tinge of bronze—made her seem a warm and glowing creature, with the hottest blood running in her veins and ready to mantle in crimson flush upon the countenance at the slightest emotion. Then how eloquent would become her features with those ardent and passionate blushes—but eloquent only of consuming sensuousness or some other feeling equally intense. She did not seem a woman who could love fondly, but furiously — not a being susceptible of any lasting impression, but full of erratic longings and desires. Nevertheless, as if profoundly conscious of her own nature and understanding all the weakness as well as all the strength of her soul, she assumed in society a look of calm bashfulness and modest reserve, which led even the most experienced observer to suppose that she was a woman whose fervid temperament was kept under becoming restraint by an innate virtue and sense of propriety that rose dominant above her passions.

Such was Editha, the Countess of Curzon.

Though the Aristocracy, generally speaking, are licentious and immoral to a degree, there are certain families belonging to that sphere who are more than the rest notorious for hereditary profligacy. Depravity would seem to run in their blood, and to be as traditionary as their titles and estates. The factitious honour of birth and the flagrant dishonour of conduct would appear to be a concurrent heritage in these cases. To such a family did Lady Curzon belong. She was one of six sisters: all were heiresses—all were married—and Editha was the only one of the six who had not proved faithful to the family character by being convicted in a court of justice of being unfaithful to her husband. The five sisters were all divorced, and had either married again or were living in a disreputable manner with paramours. Whether Editha was really faithful to the Earl of Curzon, will presently transpire: at all events, scandal had never breathed a sentence against her reputation. Her mother had been a notorious demirep—her aunts were all invested with the same unenviable notoriety: and Editha was the only female scion of her family who had reached the age of twenty-six without figuring in a trial for Crim. Con., or in a divorce case before the House of Lords.

She was lounging, as already stated, upon the sofa, when the door opened and her husband entered the room. After having witnessed the marriage of Venetia and Horace at St. George's Church, he had taken a walk in the park to endeavour to dissipate his ill-humour and vexation: but this condition of feeling was only aggravated, instead of becoming appeased, the more he gave way to thought. He accordingly returned home at about noon; and, although he was not accustomed to vouchsafe much of his company to his wife, the phantasy nevertheless took hold of him to seek her presence on this occasion.

"Well, Editha—all alone—and not dressed yet?" he exclaimed, flinging himself into a chair at some distance from where she was reclining on the sofa.

"It is too early for visitors, and I do not feel inclined to go out in the carriage to-day," she answered, in a manner not precisely cold, but indifferent.

"By the bye, you asked me for some money yesterday," observed the nobleman; "and I promised to give you some to-day. Here are a couple of hundred guineas. I borrowed two thousand of Emmerson, a bill-broker in the City."

"Ah! I have heard the name before," said Editha. "But what do you suppose I can do with two hundred guineas towards paying all that is owing?"

"You must do what you can, my dear," replied the Earl, with perfect unconcern. "I wanted the remainder for my own special purposes."

At this moment a servant entered the room bearing a letter on a silver tray, and which he handed to the Countess. She took it languidly, supposing that it was a note of invitation or frivolous correspondence from some female friend: but the instant she caught a glimpse of the handwriting, she started slightly—in a scarcely perceptible manner—while a gentle flush appeared upon her countenance. The Earl, who was observing her at the instant, noticed that little movement and this transient glow: and, he said, "Who is your correspondent?"

"No one of any importance," replied Editha: and having hastily scanned the contents of the note, she thrust it into her bosom.

The Earl was neither astonished by the evasive answer which she gave him, nor by the manner in which she thus disposed of the letter—for they had long ceased to be on terms of mutual confidence and were not accustomed to communicate, much less peruse, each other's correspondence. But he had noticed the start and the flush—and a suspicion, faint as the first glimmer of dawn in the oriental sky, gleamed in his brain.

This was the first time he had ever entertained an idea derogatory to the honour of his wife. On the contrary, he had hitherto believed her strictly faithful to her marriage-vows. But now—he scarcely knew why—a certain uneasiness crept slowly upon him. That start, almost imperceptible as it was—and that blush, faint and transient though it were—had engendered a vague and undefined misgiving in his breast. The next moment he found himself reflecting upon the fact that Editha belonged to a family notorious for its profligacy; and he knew full well that her own passions were of the strongest, most fervid and insatiable description.

All these thoughts traversed his brain in a few moments:—but dissembling the incipient uneasiness which he experienced, and suddenly determining not to excite in her mind the suspicion that he even entertained such a misgiving, he began to converse upon a variety of ordinary topics. On the other hand, Editha fancied that her temporary emotion on receiving the letter had escaped his observation; and she discoursed with more gaiety and friendliness than she had for a long time manifested towards her husband.

He would have given worlds to obtain a peep—just one peep—at that letter: but the thing was impracticable. At one moment he was half inclined to seat himself by her side and begin to toy and dally with her: but such a course, by being most unusual on his part, would at once have excited her suspicions as to his real object. He therefore abandoned the idea, and resolved to watch her movements.

Luncheon was presently served up: and afterwards Lady Curzon retired to her chamber to dress. The Earl went out to visit some friends; but they all noticed that he looked gloomy and absent. At six he returned home to dinner; and as there was no company that day, he and his wife were alone together. He drank more freely than usual, and forced himself into a gaiety which was after all so well assumed that it entirely deceived the Countess.

"What are you going to do with yourself this evening?" he inquired, when the dessert was placed upon the table and the domestics had withdrawn.

"I was thinking of passing an hour or two with Lady Lechmere," was the quiet response.

"But I thought you did not purpose to go out to-day?" said Curzon, regarding her furtively but with earnest attention.

"I meant that I was in no humour to take my usual airing in the carriage," observed Editha, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel.

"May I accompany you to Lady Lechmere's?" asked the Earl, as he helped himself to claret.

"What an idea!" ejaculated the Countess, looking hard at her husband: then, feeling convinced that he suspected nothing, so well did he dissimulate, she observed, laughing, "The world will fancy you have become quite uxorious all on a sudden. Besides, Lady Lechmere did not include you in the invitation she sent me this morning—for that note which I received when you were with me, was from her."

"Well, I do not press it," said the Earl, apparently quite satisfied. "Only I thought that as we have been a little more friendly to-day than for some time past, it would be as well if such feeling were to continue."

"And who first destroyed that feeling?" asked Editha, with a slight accent of sarcasm in her voice.

"I must confess that I have not proved a model of a husband," said the Earl: "but then there are allowances to be made. Remember the artificial state of society in which we live, move, and breathe,—think of the temptatations by which a man of my rank and position is inevitably surrounded——"

"Oh! I have not time to discuss the point with you now," exclaimed Editha, starting from her seat and laughing in a lively manner. "It is seven o'clock, and I must hurry away. But I shall cheerfully promote the friendly feeling which you say has arisen between us once more. So now adieu—I am off to North Audley Street,"—where, we should observe, Lady Lechmere resided.

"And I shall go and pass the evening with Leveson," said the Earl: "or else with Huntingdon, if the Marquis should not be at home."

The husband and wife both quitted the dining-room together. The former took down his hat from a peg in the hall, and sallied forth at once: and Editha, having seen him thus take his departure, ascended to her own chamber.

But the Earl of Curzon, instead of repairing to the Marquis of Leveson's, hastened to the nearest hackney-coach stand—entered a vehicle—and returned in it to the immediate vicinage of his own mansion. He ordered it to stop nearly opposite, as if waiting to receive a fare from the house at which it thus drew up: and remaining inside, he kept watch upon the door of his own dwelling. His wife's carriage was already there: and in a few minutes he saw the front door open. Then a female figure, enveloped in a handsome cloak, and with a thick veil over her face, descended the stone steps and entered the carriage, which immediately drove away.

Thrusting his head from the window of the hackney-coach, the Earl directed the driver to follow the carriage at an easy distance: but when,

in the course of a few minutes, he found that the equipage which he was pursuing, turned into North Audley Street, he said to himself, "Well, after all she is really going to Lady Lechmere's. Perhaps I have done her an injustice:"—and yet the dark suspicion still remained in the profundity of his soul.

The carriage stopped at Lady Lechmere's—the hackney-coach halted a few doors off—and the Earl again watched eagerly from the window. "Yes—she enters the house—and the carriage drives away," he muttered to himself. "I will now go and join the party at Lady Lechmere's—invent some excuse for following Editha after what she said upon the proposal I made to accompany her—and endeavour to ascertain whether she expected to meet some particular individual there."

The Earl was about to order the hackney-coach to drive up to Lady Lechmere's door, when the thought struck him that the course he was about to adopt could not possibly fail to be seen through by Editha. If she were really guilty, it would only serve to put her the more completely on her guard: and if she were innocent, he would be rendering himself supremely ridiculous in her eyes. No—he must continue to veil his suspicions, and watch her movements until he should either obtain substantial proof of her infidelity or else acquire the certainty that his fears were totally unfounded. Having thus resolved, he ordered the hackney-coach to take him back to Grosvenor Street; and alighting at a short distance from his dwelling, he dismissed the vehicle.

Consulting his watch by the aid of a door-lamp, he saw that it wanted twenty minutes to eight; and not knowing what to do with himself for the rest of the evening, he resolved to proceed to Lord Leveson's in Albemarle Street. But a sudden idea struck him. The fact was that his wife's principal lady's-maid, Gertrude by name, was a very beautiful young woman, with a voluptuous figure, a wanton countenance, fine teeth, and a pair of the most wicked eyes that ever sent forth flashing looks from pupils of the darkest jet. The Earl had more than once flung furtive glances of deep meaning upon the captivating Gertrude: but she invariably appeared to take no notice of his amorous oglings. This bashfulness on her part, he felt assured, was only an affectation of strict propriety; and, being a very handsome man, as well as imbued with all the characteristic conceit, arrogance, and vanity of the order to which he belonged, he flattered himself that he had only to become more explicit in his overtures to achieve an easy triumph in that quarter. The opportunity and the humour now alike served admirably: his wife was from home—he was restless and uneasy—he wanted something to amuse and divert his mind—and he resolved to enter upon the conquest of the beautiful Gertrude forthwith.

Thus, only a few minutes after watching the movements of his wife, and still smarting with the suspicion of her infidelity,—an infidelity which, if brought home to her, he was prepared to brand with all the ignominy of exposure, prosecution, and divorce,—this unprincipled aristocrat retraced his way homeward with the deliberate intention of seducing that self-same wife's confidential attendant. But is this flagrant case an isolated one?—or is it a mere type of man's too frequent conduct? Alas! yes: the husband may sin with comparative impunity—but if the wife, no matter how neglected and ill-used at home, yields to temptation, there is naught but the highest chastisement and most signal penalty for her! Truly, woman has her wrongs which should engage the thoughts and enlist the sympathies of the philanthropist and moralist in this age when all the world is crying out for political and social reform!

The Earl of Curzon retraced his way homeward: but just as he arrived in front of his house, he beheld a female dressed in the well known apparel of Gertrude herself, ascending the area steps. Yes—it was *her* cloak, which he had often observed as becoming her so well—*her* bonnet, which he had frequently noticed as being worn so coquettishly! But a thick black veil was drawn over her countenance—a modest precaution which all respectable and well-behaved young women of her class were wont to adopt in those times when the streets were comparatively unprotected with the wretched guardianship of old watchmen, and when roystering blades and impudent gallants were accustomed to insult every woman whose unveiled features happened to please their phantasy.

"Gertrude, my dear girl," said Curzon, assuming his blandest tones, "where are you going?"

But, instead of stopping as the Earl had hoped and expected, she brushed past him with evident indignation and hurried along the street. He was however almost immediately at her side again: and, in a voice of gentle remonstrance, he said, "Why are you so cruel? You know that I love you, Gertrude—yes, ten thousand times better than I love your mistress: my looks must have told you so. Come, will you not speak to me?—not a single word? Throw up that veil—and let me see whether you are really and positively angry. I would wager anything that you are smiling with a delightful wickedness behind that thick screen. Gertrude, do you hear me? Surely you do not require so much coaxing?"

But, instead of making any response to this softly insidious language, she endeavoured to outstrip him: then, finding that he persevered in accompanying her, and evidently alarmed or else profoundly indignant at his importunities, she shrank against the wall as if about to faint.

"Good heavens, Gertrude!" exclaimed the nobleman, looking uneasily up and down the street, with the fear that they might be observed and that it would be supposed he was ill-using the female: "you cannot mean that you are really angry with me? Give me your hand—take my arm—and we will converse quietly and tranquilly as we walk along."

Thus speaking, he endeavoured to take her hand: but she withdrew it violently, a faint scream bursting from her lips at the same moment. The Earl was astounded: he had not anticipated such opposition to his overtures. Suddenly the front door of a house opposite opened—and several gentlemen appeared on the threshold.

"For God's sake, come away with me, Gertrude!" said the Earl, impatiently.

But she made a movement as if about to fly towards the gentlemen at the door opposite: and the Earl, dreading the scandal of an exposure, beat a rapid retreat towards his own mansion, while the

THE COUNTESS OF CURZON.

object of his importunity hurried away in the contrary direction.

Baffled, enraged, disappointed, and humiliated, the Earl of Curzon re-entered his dwelling: and after drinking a tumbler of claret to cool the throat which was parched with the fever of overwrought excitement, he flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to his unpleasurable reflections. Everything seemed to be going wrong with him—all circumstances were combining for his annoyance. His pecuniary affairs were in no agreeable position—he had failed to possess himself of Venetia, whose charms had well nigh maddened him—the suspicion which he entertained relative to his wife, was still strong enough to goad and torture him cruelly—and now the rebuff he had experienced from Gertrude crowned his humiliation and annoyance. He was just in that humour when a man would give anything to be able to vent his spite upon the head of some victim, either for a real or an imaginary offence.

Suddenly a thought struck him. His wife was from home—and Gertrude was also absent. The former would not, in all probability, return until eleven o'clock or perhaps midnight; and the latter had no doubt received permission to pass the evening with her friends. What if the Earl were to search in Editha's boudoir to see if he could discover the note which she had received in the morning, or any other letters that might afford a clue to her conduct?

Inspired with this idea, Curzon hastened upstairs—entered the boudoir—and, closing the door, began to search all the drawers. He however discovered nothing of any consequence. Editha's writing-desk stood upon a table: but it was locked. He took out his own bunch of keys and tried every one of them at all corresponding with the size of the lock. The last key was found to fit—and the desk was opened.

One of the compartments was filled with letters, which the Earl proceeded to examine with careful

attention. But they were chiefly invitations to parties—communications from the female friends of the Countess or from her sisters—or dunning applications from tradesmen. One note, however, somewhat puzzled the Earl. It was from Lady Lechmere—dated about three months back—and running as follows:—

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you back a reply by Gertrude. Yes—I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servants shall receive orders *to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon*. But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,

"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

This letter, laconic though it were, was sufficient to strengthen the Earl's misgivings. There was evidently some secret understanding between his wife and Lady Lechmere. What usual precautions were to be adopted?—why was there nothing to fear?—and if the girl alluded to was Gertrude, wherefore should it be necessary to exercise caution in trusting her? Did Editha receive a lover's visits at Lady Lechmere's? If so, what meant the orders to the servants to admit no one but Editha herself? Lady Lechmere was a widow, and had neither brother, uncle, son, or male cousin, residing with her beneath the same roof. Editha's lover, if she had one, was not therefore an inhabitant of the house: and how could she go thither to meet him, since none but herself was to be admitted?

There was a deep mystery in all this: and the more profound the mystery, the stronger becomes the suspicion. So it was in the present case;—and while completely perplexed by the ambiguous contents of the note, the Earl of Curzon nevertheless regarded it as an item of evidence against the Countess. At all events it was certain that whatsoever the secret might be, Gertrude was in the confidence of her mistress: but had he not mortally offended the lady's-maid by his conduct that evening?—and could he hope to propitiate her in such a way as to lead her to divulge anything she knew?

Reserving this matter for after consideration, the Earl continued his search amongst his wife's papers. To his further surprise he presently discovered a bill of exchange, accepted by himself. It was an old bill, which had been duly honoured by him on arriving at maturity: but it ought to be upon a file in his library, instead of in his wife's desk. It might however have come there by accident: and after all, the incident was trivial in itself and could have no connexion with the object of the search which he was instituting.

At the bottom of the desk he discovered a slip of paper, on which the name of *Curzon* was written several times. He examined the writing attentively, and soon saw that it was not in his own hand, as he had at the first glance imagined it to be. But the writing was evidently in imitation of his own; and a more minute inspection convinced him that it was Editha's. Had she, then, been practising his signature? It appeared so: but for what earthly purpose? The bill of exchange caught his eye: and it instantaneously struck him that she had surreptitiously possessed herself of it in order to copy his signature. Yes—this was now apparent enough: but again recurred the question—For what purpose had she done this?

There were no more papers to examine; and the Earl returned all the letters and documents to the compartment of the desk whence he had taken them. The other compartment only contained writing-paper and sealing-wax. He locked the desk again, and quitting the bourdoir unobservedly as he had entered it, retraced his way to the dining-room.

CHAPTER LII.

THE BILLS OF EXCHANGE.

At about a quarter past eight o'clock, Malpas and Mr. Emmerson entered Soho Square, and proceeded direct to the establishment of Mrs. Gale, who, previously informed by the Colonel of the intended visit, was prepared to receive them. In fact, the Colonel had been with her in the morning; and having found means to pay her the five hundred guineas owing to her, together with a handsome douceur by want of interest, he once more stood in her good books. For Mrs. Gale never cared what other people might think or say of a person, so long as she had reason to be satisfied with his conduct.

The Colonel had told her in the morning exactly what he wished to be done in the evening; and Mrs. Gale had made arrangements accordingly. She now therefore conducted Malpas and Emmerson up into a suite of rooms which we must describe.

First, there was a handsome parlour, from which a little cabinet opened at the side with a glass door. This glass door had green blinds within, so that no one could see into it from the parlour: whereas a person stationed in that cabinet could easily observe as he might also overhear, everything that took place in the parlour. Beyond the parlour itself there was a bed chamber, with a dressing-room adjoining.

Such was the suite to which Mrs. Gale conducted the Colonel and the bill-broker; and the moment she had retired, Emmerson ensconsed himself in the cabinet, taking the key with him and locking the door inside.

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Gale re-appeared, introducing the Countess of Curzon, whom she ceremoniously assisted to lay aside her cloak and bonnet. The moment that the woman had retired, Editha threw herself into the arms of the Colonel and embraced him with the fervour of infatuated passion.

"I had some little difficulty in keeping this appointment which you gave me, my dear Percy," said the Countess, addressing the Colonel by his Christian name. "Would you believe that the Earl was seized with quite an uxorious fit to-day, and actually wanted to accompany me to Lady Lechmere's? But no matter——"

"You look somewhat flurried, dearest Editha," observed Malpas, contemplating her with attention. "Has anything occurred——"

"Nothing of any consequence. I will tell you presently," interrupted the lady, as she sate down by his side upon a sofa. "But you mus first explain why you wished to see me so very particularly this evening as your note stated. You charged me to be sure and not disappoint you, Percy. And by the bye, when I think of it, the Earl was with me when your note came."

"But he suspects nothing?" said Malpas, anxiously.

"Nothing — absolutely nothing," replied the Countess, emphatically. "Indeed, how can he? All our precautions are so excellently taken. But pray explain the urgent matter——"

"You are well aware, dearest Editha," said Malpas, "that I am always longing to be with you —always unhappy unless in your society—and never happier than when clasping you in my arms. Therefore, it is not surprising that I should have been so urgent to meet you this evening—especially as some days have elapsed since last we met. But there was another inducement which prompted me to be so pressing with regard to an interview for this evening: in fact, I wished to have some serious conversation with you——"

"What about?" inquired Editha, quickly: and her large black eyes were fixed with a sort of uneasiness upon the countenance of her paramour.

"Those bills, my dearest love," answered Malpas,

"Ah!" ejaculated the Countess, becoming visibly troubled. "You surely do not require any more assistance in that shape?"

"Listen to me with patience for a few moments, Editha," said the Colonel. "You are aware that I obtained the money for those bills from a gentleman named Emmerson——"

"Yes—and my husband has likewise received money from that Mr. Emmerson," interrupted Editha. "He told me so this morning. But it was evident from his manner that he did not know you had been dealing with the same money-broker."

"He does *not* know it, Editha—and very fortunate is it for me," added Malpas, with a profound seriousness of manner, "that he is thus ignorant."

"Of course it is, Percy," exclaimed the Countess, —"very fortunate for us both. If he knew that I had given the bills to you, he would as a matter of course instantaneously suspect that there is some very close intimacy between us. When you first communicated to me your extreme pecuniary embarrassments and stated that the Earl had refused you the service of his acceptance to a bill of exchange, I told you that I could procure his name to a promissory note for my own use——"

"And I promised you," observed the Colonel, "that I would place that note in the hands of a gentleman who would advance the money upon it and not breathe a syllable to a soul relative to the transaction. I kept my word——"

"No doubt," interrupted the Countess: "and you also undertook to provide the funds to redeem the security even before it should become due, so that the bill might not be presented to the Earl at all;—otherwise, if presented, he would of course see your name upon it."

"True, my dear Editha," said Malpas. "And you gave me several bills at short intervals, with the Earl's acceptance to them."

"But I cannot see the utility of this recapitulation of circumstances so well known to both of us," observed the Countess, with the glitter of uneasiness in her luminous eyes. "The whole matter is summed up in a few words. You were exceedingly pressed for money, and required a collateral security. All these things you explained to me, as I knew little or nothing about bills and promissory notes previously. I told you that I would undertake to wheedle the Earl out of his acceptance, alleging that I required it to satisfy some pressing liabilities due to my jewellers and dress-makers. Knowing that the Earl would not be in a condition to meet the bill, I was obliged to assure him that one of my sisters had promised me a large sum of money in a month or two, and that I would provide for the bill by the time it should come due. This was the pretext: but in reality I relied upon your obtaining the requisite funds—and I sincerely hope you will be enabled to do so. Tell me, Percy, is there any doubt upon that point?"

"My dear Editha, I shall obtain the funds some how or another," answered Malpas: "but that is not the immediate question. I am afraid that prompted by your affection for me, and in order to save me from arrest and degradation at the time——"

"What do you mean?" inquired the Countess, with all the petulance of intense uneasiness.

"I mean, dearest," answered the Colonel,—"that—but do not be offended——that your husband did not sign those bills——"

"And what makes you think so?" demanded Editha, actually gasping with the vain and ineffectual efforts which she made to conceal her terror.

"Because Emmerson suspects something of the kind," returned Malpas. "He has compared the Earl's signature with that upon the bills which I placed in his hands——"

"O God! I am lost," cried Editha, no longer able to keep down the effervescence of her harrowing emotions: and covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

"Compose yourself, for heaven's sake!" said the Colonel. "Nothing is yet known—Mr. Emmerson is a gentleman and possesses a kind heart—everything can be repaired and remedied! Only do, I conjure you, my Editha—do tell me all the truth."

"But is it yet time to prevent this storm from bursting over my head?" she exclaimed, removing her hands from her countenance and gazing up piteously in the face of her paramour.

"There *is* time, I can assure you, Editha,—plenty of time!" answered Malpas. "Do not give way to grief, which is now unavailing—but let us look the whole affair boldly in the face. Mr. Emmerson only requires to have the payment assured—and he will never breathe a word relative to the transaction. But pray tell me everything without reserve."

"I will," said the Countess, endeavouring to compose her looks and her feelings. "You communicated your embarrassments to me—and I was distracted at the thought of seeing you borne off to a debtors' prison. I therefore resolved to adopt a desperate course in order to save you. And yet it neither seemed to me so desperate nor dangerous after all; because, from what you told me, I understood clearly enough that if you provided the funds in time to take up the bills, the Earl need never know that his name had been made use of at all. And that you would so provide the funds in due season I felt confident. Well, I obtained from the Earl's file of papers an old bill which he had honoured some time since; and I imitated his signature, after some practice, to the best of my ability You had previously told me that if I obtained his acceptance to the blank stamps, you would fill them up. Now, you must forgive me, my dear Percy," said the Countess, in a tone of impassioned entreaty,

—"for I did all this entirely through devotion to you."

"Forgive you, dearest Editha!" exclaimed Malpas, much of whose enthusiasm of tone and manner was affected: "how can I do otherwise than forgive you? You have risked much—I do not think you are precisely aware *how much*—for my sake: and it is fortunate that we are in such hands as Emmerson's. He is a perfect gentleman—possessed of great influence in the City—and will soon be an Alderman," added the Colonel, sententiously; for he was making these remarks in order to propitiate the bill-broker whose close vicinage was so little suspected by the Countess of Curzon.

"It is indeed fortunate that the bills are in such hands," said the Countess, now bitterly repenting the imprudence into which a passionate infatuation had betrayed her at the time. "But does he already know that you have received them from me?"

"I was compelled to confess the truth, Editha," replied Malpas: "or else he would have given me into custody on a charge of forgery."

"Ah! then you hesitated not to sacrifice my honour in order to save your own!" ejaculated the Countess, suddenly starting from the sofa, while the rich blood mantled in scarlet glow through the transparent duskiness of her skin.

"Pardon me, Editha," said Malpas, confused and humiliated: "but what could I do?"

"Risked Newgate—death—anything, sooner than betray the honour of a confiding woman!" exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, fixing upon her paramour a look of withering scorn and superb contempt. "Did I risk nothing for you when I forged my husband's name to save you from a debtors' gaol?—have I risked nothing in giving you that love which could alone prompt me to such a perilous act? It was in a moment of utter contempt and indifference for all consequences, that I became a forger: and that supreme recklessness was produced by my devotion to you! Now, sir, you have rewarded me by betraying my honour into the hands of an usurer——"

"For God's sake use no harsh words with respect to Emmerson!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Your honour is safe in his keeping—he will not betray you——"

"Wretch!" ejaculated the Countess, bitterly. "Much as I loved you a minute back, I now hate and detest you! Viper—would to heaven that I had the power of crushing you under my foot!"

"Editha, you are raving!" cried Malpas, his countenance ghastly pale and his lips livid and quivering. "Do you intend to quarrel with me for ever?"

"My pardon you can never obtain, sir!" answered the Countess haughtily. "If my heart were henceforth to feel one moment's tenderness towards you, I would stab it to the very core. But enough of this portion of the painful drama. One word more—and I take my departure. Am I to understand that you will arrange with Mr. Emmerson for these bills and that you will provide for them in due course?—or will you crown your infamy by suffering the transaction to reach my husband's ears?"

"I will provide for them—on my honour I will provide for them?" exclaimed the Colonel. "But hear me——"

"Enough, sir!" ejaculated the Countess with imperious tone and haughty manner.

She took up her bonnet and cloak: he advanced, tremblingly and pale, to assist her in putting on the latter; but she repulsed him with a gesture of scorn. He essayed to murmur a few syllables of abject entreaty—but she darted upon him a look that seemed fraught with the scathing powers of lightning.

A moment afterwards—and she was gone!

Throughout this scene the bill-broker had remained a hidden but profoundly interested observer in the cabinet with the glass door. It was the first time he had ever seen the Countess of Curzon: and he was astonished as well as enraptured at the peculiar style of her loveliness. Her beauty appeared to him of the Mauritanian species which characterised the Moorish women who once made Spain their home, and the memory of whose charms has been preserved in many a tradition, legend, and romance. On throwing off the cloak which enveloped her entire person, Editha had appeared in a dark velvet dress, which seemed most befitting her complexion: and the admirable fashion of the costume set off the sculptural symmetry of her shape to its utmost advantage. Then the power of her eyes, so luminous in their intense darkness, and so splendid with their long jetty lashes—the rich hue of the flush that so often mantled on her cheeks during the conversation with her now discarded paramour—the vivid red of those lips that were so delicious in their moistfulness and that seemed to breathe sweets even when the words that passed through them were sharp with scorn—the quick heavings of that bosom which the low-bodied dress left more than half exposed—the grace, the elegance, and the dignity of her attitudes, all adapting themselves to the style of the discourse she was hearing or giving utterance to at the time,—in a word, every charm and every attraction that invested or surrounded her, produced a powerful effect upon Emmerson.

She departed in anger, as we have already described: and then the bill-broker, unlocking the door, came forth from the place of his concealment.

"Now, Emmerson, are you satisfied?" said Malpas, still trembling beneath the influence of that withering, blighting, scathing look which Editha had last thrown upon him.

"She is the only woman I ever saw whose love is worth dying for," responded the bill-broker: then, gazing upon Malpas with somewhat of that scorn and contempt which he had caught as it were by transfusion from the noble lady who had just taken her departure, he said, "How feel you now, Colonel, after the closing scene in this drama, as the Countess so appropriately styled it?"

"Whatever has happened, Mr. Emmerson," replied Malpas, moodily, "'tis you who have driven me to it. But now that you have heard my innocence proclaimed from the lady's own lips—now also that you know every minute detail of the entire transaction—what course do you propose to adopt?"

"I am not decided at present," answered the bill-broker. "You may however rest assured that I shall not take any step which may compromise the Countess of Curzon. But you will come to my office to-morrow morning and give me your own bill—mind, *your own bill*—for the amount which you owe me."

"I will be with you punctually at ten o'clock," said Malpas, deriving no small consolation from the manner in which Emmerson seemed disposed to treat the affair.

They then took their departure from Mrs. Gale's establishment.

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Meantime the Earl of Curzon had been lounging in a restless manner upon the sofa in the dining-room in Grosvenor Street, or else pacing uneasily to and fro like a chafing lion in his cage: and every now and then he had recourse to the wine-decanter. But instead of soothing his agitated thoughts, the juice of the grape added an artificial stimulant to that natural excitement which was torturing him; and though his spirit was so restless, the time hung insupportably heavy upon his hands.

At length the time-piece upon the mantle struck eleven; and a few minutes afterwards the carriage drove up to the front door of the house. The Earl composed his features as well as he was able, and went out into the hall to meet his wife—for he felt anxious to have some conversation with her, although he had not made up his mind what to say, or how to turn the wished-for discourse upon any topic which might suit his own purposes. But he was in one of those humours when a man of excitable temperament must have his say, even if for no other end than to pick a quarrel and find an issue for his pent-up spleen.

"I hope you have passed a pleasant evening," he said, accosting the lady, as she was hurrying through the hall, enveloped in the handsome cloak and with her thick veil drawn over her countenance, just as he had seen her when entering the carriage at half-past seven o'clock. "Hey-day! what does this mean?" he exclaimed petulantly, as she swept abruptly past him—flitted up stairs—and disappeared from his view all in a moment.

With another cause for ill-humour, he was returning to the parlour when the sounds of light footsteps and the rustling of garments met his ears: and look-round, he caught a glimpse of the cloak of the pretty lady's-maid, as the wearer was also hastening up the marble-staircase. The Earl hurried after her and overtook her on the landing.

"Gertrude," he said, catching her by the arm and speaking in a low rapid whisper, "for heaven's sake, do not mention to your mistress what occurred just now:"—and as he uttered these words, he strove with piercing looks to penetrate the thick veil which was also worn by her whom he thus addressed.

But breaking abruptly away from him, and without a syllable of reply, she bounded up the next flight of stairs.

"Perdition seize the women," muttered the Earl to himself, as he slowly retraced his steps to the dining-room. "What the devil possesses them both? My wife sweeps past me in the hall as if I had the plague—and Gertrude breaks away from me on the landing as if contact with me were contagion. Then this mania of wearing their veils up to their very bed-rooms, as if they dared not look a man in the face!"

And the Earl walked to and fro in the parlour with uneven steps and agitated feelings.

He waited ten minutes in the hope that his wife would come down previously to retiring for the night: but as she did not make her appearance, he resolved to go up to her boudoir and either induce her to join him at the supper-table, or else remain and converse with her in her own room. But as he was ascending the stairs he met Gertrude face to face.

The beautiful girl had laid aside her bonnet, veil, and cloak—and she could not help encountering the Earl's looks. A smile of ineffable archness and mischievous meaning appeared upon her pouting lips, as she thus met his gaze: but she was hurrying past him when he once more caught her by the arm and held her firmly.

"You have not breathed a word to your mistress?" he said, in a hurried whisper.

"No, my lord—not a word," she replied, with a singularly wicked and roguish look. "But you deserve that I should have shown you no mercy after your rude treatment."

"I know you will pardon me, pretty Gertrude," he said. "But why would you not speak to me just now on the landing.

"Why, my lord!" echoed the abigail: "because I heard other footsteps upon the stairs—at least I thought so—and likewise because I was afraid her ladyship would be angry with me for staying out so late. I was ordered to be home by half-past ten—and it was after eleven when I got back. The carriage drove up to the door just as I was descending the area-steps."

"And where had you been, Gertrude?" inquired the Earl, thinking that the lady's-maid was not so cruel after all, inasmuch as she now conversed with tolerable freedom and apparent good-humour.

"I passed the evening with my parents, my lord," she replied, looking however as if she felt annoyed by the question: "and it was with the permission of her ladyship," she added pointedly.

"Which is as much as to say that I have no right to inquire into your movements," observed the nobleman, affecting to smile. "Come, tell me candidly—are you very, very angry with me for my conduct of this evening?"

"Let me go, my lord, and I will tell you," said Gertrude.

"Now, then—you are free," observed the Earl, as he let go his grasp on her arm.

The lady's-maid flung another look of unspeakable archness upon him, and flitted down the stairs with the speed and lightness of a spirit.

"The little minx!" muttered Curzon to himself. "But she is not quite such a prude after all—and she shall yet be mine!"

The little interview with the lady's-maid, being of a more satisfactory nature than his two former attempts to engage her in conversation, put the nobleman into a somewhat better humour—especially as he had received from her lips the assurance that his conduct was not reported to his wife. For, although he had not on previous occasions been equally solicitous to veil his irregularities from her knowledge, he did not wish to appear ridiculous in her eyes as having met with so mortifying a rebuff from her maid—nor was he desirous that such a circumstance should reach her ears at the very time he was seeking for proofs of her own suspected infidelity.

One weight was therefore lifted from the Earl's mind: and now, becoming capable of calmer reasoning than for the last two or three hours, he saw the impossibility of as yet making any positive

charge against his wife, or of even alluding to Lady Lechmere's ambiguous note without admitting that he had searched the writing-desk in Editha's absence. Moreover, he had now hopes of winning Gertrude to his interests: and as she was evidently in the confidence of her mistress, it was important to glean from her lips those secrets of which she had a knowledge.

Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through the mind of the Earl, as he lingered upon the stairs after Gertrude had flitted away so abruptly: and no longer yearning to precipitate matters with Editha, he once more retraced his steps to the parlour.

Ringing the bell, he ordered the servant who answered the summons, to inquire whether Editha was coming down to supper: and the response was to the effect that the Countess had supped at Lady Lechmere's, but would join his lordship in a few minutes.

The nobleman therefore sate down to the repast; and his wife presently made her appearance, laughing and in the best possible humour.

"My dear Charles," she said, tapping him playfully upon the cheek as she passed behind him to take a chair, "you must have thought it very strange—very rude—and very unkind in me to hasten away so abruptly when you spoke to me in the hall as I came from the carriage: but I was labouring under a cruel misconception at the time. In fact, I heard it whispered at Lady Lechmere's, about nine o'clock, that you had just been seen at the Haymarket Theatre in company with a female of notorious profligacy. You may therefore conceive how annoyed I was. But I have just learnt that you have been at home all the evening—and therefore the accusation must have arisen in sheer wickedness or downright error."

"But who could possibly have told you such a thing?" demanded the Earl, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

"Now I am not going to get you into a quarrel with any one," replied Editha, in the softest tone and the most caressing manner. "Besides, it was an elderly lady whom I overheard mentioning the circumstance to another antiquated gossip; and it was not intended for my ears. So you must ask me nothing more upon the subject. Suffice it to say that the imputation was a calumny."

"But if I had found Leveson at home and had remained to pass the evening with him," said Lord Curzon, "you would have believed the tale and fancied that I was really at the Haymarket with a bad woman?"

"The affair would certainly have looked suspicious," observed Editha: "but it only proves that we should never be hasty in judging from appearances."

"True!" exclaimed the Earl, struck by the observation: then, after a few minutes' pause, during which he drank a glass of wine, he said, "It is a pity that husbands and wives ever keep any secrets from each other: the habit breeds distrust—and distrust embitters their existence."

"Are you going to turn over a new leaf?" inquired the Countess, laughing gaily. "Your whole manner, conduct, and language to-day induce me to think so."

"But if I have my secrets from you, Editha," said the Earl, attentively watching her countenance as he spoke, "have you none which you keep from me?"

"None, that may properly be called secrets," she replied, apparently with the utmost sincerity: and therefore the reader will perceive that she was as thorough a proficient in the arts of hypocrisy as we have already described her.

"I am glad of it, my love," exclaimed the Earl, completely staggered by the candour of her response and the ingenuousness of her looks: and again he reflected upon her observation relative to the imprudence of judging rashly by appearances.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE CHANDLER'S SHOP.

MUTTON HILL is a small section of that large and loathsome neighbourhood which lies immediately behind the Sessions House on Clerkenwell Green. At the period of which we are writing, as well as at the present day, it consisted principally of second-hand furniture warehouses, old-clothes' emporiums, and shops devoted to the sale of sweet stuff, chandlery, shell-fish, coals and potatoes, and cheap crockery.

The chandler's shop requires especial attention. It was small, dingy in outward appearance, and gloomy-looking internally. Over the door was painted, in little white letters on a black ground, the name of WILLIAM TAGGARTY; and under this name, in smaller letters still, were the words, *Licensed Dealer in Tea, Coffee, Tobacco, and Snuff.* The door, which was half-glazed, usually stood open as long as it was light: but when evening began to draw in, it was closed—a tinkling bell being suspended above to give notice of the entrance of a customer. On a shelf, or ledge, which ran along the middle of the window, appeared an array of small glasses containing brandy-balls, peppermint-sticks, bull's-eyes, hard-bake, acid drops, barley-sugar, candy, horehound, lollipops, and other sweets of the same school of confectionery. On the board in the lower part of the window, appeared bundles of fire-wood, Flanders' bricks, red herrings, a basket of eggs, a huge piece of Cheshire cheese, three or four ditto Glo'ster, some bottles of blacking, five or six bars of yellow soap, a few loaves of bread, a piece of bacon, a bladder of hog's lard, a box of "real havannahs" made of cabbage leaves, some jars of pickles, and a small box of starch. Suspended to the wood-work of the windows, and dangling amidst the necessaries and luxuries just enumerated, were divers bunches of candles—sixes, eights, middling tens, and farthing rushlights.

On the shelves behind the counter were a few canisters of tea and coffee—some jars of snuff and tobacco—and a miscellaneous assortment of tinder-boxes, tapes, laces, balls of cotton and worsted, papers of pins and needles, brushes, balls of twine, and "rounds" of matches with sharp yellow points looking like the beaks of callow birds—"lucifers" not being invented in those times. The counter itself was furnished with drawers containing sugars of divers descriptions: and above it, to a horizontal beam, hung a farther supply of candles, forming a thick fringe of tallow. At one end of the counter

stood more loaves, a block of salt, a firkin of butter, and a tin treacle-can. Against the wall rested a nine-gallon cask of very small beer, with two or three measures in readiness to serve out the poor thin fluid; and in one corner of the shop was a group of mops, brooms, and brushes. A nest of little drawers, with the labels thumbed and fingered into perfect illegibility, but doubtless containing pepper, mustard, spices, and such like articles, was discernible in the other corner of this complete and interesting emporium of commerce.

The sole proprietor of the establishment was Mr. William Taggarty, as the name above the street-door irrefragably proved. But who was the happy owner of so compendious an assortment of articles — or, as the brokers' advertisements in newspapers would have described it, this snug concern? We are bound, for truth's sake, to admit that the appellation of Taggarty was merely an assumed one for convenience' sake, and that the individual bearing it was none other than the Kinchin-Grand alluded to by Jack the Foundling in his conversation with Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

Behind the shop there was a small parlour—a very tiny place, just capable of holding a little round table and three chairs, and quite filled whenever those chairs were all occupied. If we look into this parlour at about nine o'clock in the evening, on the day after the occurrences chronicled in the previous chapter, we shall find Mr. William Taggarty seated in earnest conversation with Richard and Sarah Melmoth.

These two last mentioned individuals have already been described: it is therefore only necessary to observe that Taggarty was a man about thirty-five years of age — thin — with a sort of shopkeeper's stoop in his gait—and having a certain greasy appearance, as if his head were constantly coming in contact with the candles suspended over his counter, and his hands were being incessantly wiped upon his dingy apron.

Upon the little round table stood a bottle of gin and three glasses: for Mr. Taggarty was regaling his visitors, while discussing with them certain matters of importance.

"And so you are quite sure that Jack didn't peach agin the Hangman?" said Taggarty, as he refilled the glasses.

"I'm certain he didn't," replied Dick Melmoth. "He was staying with Larry Sampson at the time, as I've already told you——"

"Then the more likely that he *did* blab," observed Taggarty.

"How the devil could he, when I tell you that none of us knowed anything about the matter until we saw it in the papers on Tuesday morning?" exclaimed Dick Melmoth. "Neither me or Sal was told of it beforehand—and therefore I'm sure Jack the Foundling wasn't. Mr. Coffin kept it precious close to himself, and had no assistants except the footman who was killed!"

"Let me see," said Taggarty, in a musing tone, "it took place on Sunday night——"

"Yes—and this is Friday," remarked Melmoth. "Jack the Foundling came home on Tuesday, as soon as he saw the affair in the paper. He sneaked away unbeknown to Larry Sampson: and the instant he came into the shop in Fleet Lane, he burst out crying, saying to Sal and me, '*You don't think I had any hand in this?*' We knowed what he meant; for we had just been reading the account in the paper; and we told him at once that we didn't suspect him. He seemed quite cheered by that assurance."

"Yes, that he did!" exclaimed Sal. "I'm sure he had nothing to do with it:"—and what with the effects of gin and grief, she began to whimper.

"Well, it's a bad business," said Taggarty, shaking his head. "And yet there's one consolation," he added after a pause.

"What's that?" demanded Sally Melmoth, eagerly.

"Why, that a man who is drowned can't be hanged," replied the chandler very seriously.

"Ah! well, so it is," observed the woman, also shaking her head: then, having drained her glass, she continued in a whimpering tone, "Poor Daniel's gone for ever! Who'd have thought that he was born to be drowned in the Thames? I'm sure I shall never drink another drop of *that* water as long as I live," she added: and thus speaking, she held out her glass for Taggarty to refill it with gin.

"But who could have peached?" said this individual, as he did the honours with the bottle. "You see that the constables were concealed already in the house at Richmond——"

"Perhaps the footman himself had either repented, or else was a traitor all along," observed Dick Melmoth: "and may be that Mr. Coffin meant to shoot him, though the papers say he aimed the pistol at Larry Sampson."

"Well, that's likely enough," said Taggarty. "And now, what are you going to do? Shall you keep the shop open in Fleet Lane?"

"To be sure," replied Dick. "How the devil are we to live unless we do?"

"Ah! that's right," said Taggarty. "Don't go back to your old practices, unless it is in a quiet way: but at all events keep the shop as a *blind*. Look at me, my dear friends—I'm getting on well, and without no danger too. I keep my hands from wrongfully prigging: but if a feller brings in a cheese to sell—or a ham—or a bit of bacon—or what not, I don't ask any questions but give him a trifle for the goods. *He* may have filched them: but no one can bring the thing home to *me*. Ah! them was rum times when we was all together at the Kinchin-ken in Grub Street, and when the poor Shickster was alive! Wouldn't she have been proud to serve behind that there counter in such a snug concern as this?" added the chandler, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the shop.

"Well, it is a nice place—so compact!" observed Dick Melmoth, glancing around from the parlour towards the magazine of miscellaneous goods.

"By the bye," said Taggarty, "you haven't told me how Jack the Foundling was treated at Larry Sampson's."

"Oh! like a prince," answered Dick. "He says that he feels all manner of kind and grateful things towards Mr. Sampson; and he was sorry to be compelled to leave him. But he couldn't stay after the business down at Richmond. He says that he knows Mr. Sampson only performed his duty in that respect: but still he had not the heart to remain with the man who may be said to be the cause of poor Coffin's death."

"Of course," observed Taggarty. "For if Sampson and his people hadn't been planted there, the Hangman wouldn't have run off and been drowned in the river. That's quite clear."

"Quite clear indeed," whimpered Sally Melmoth, again seeking consolation in the gin.

At this moment the shop-bell tinkled as the glazed door was opened by some one entering the place; and Taggarty, observing that it was no doubt some customer, hastened from the parlour, closing the door behind him. Immediately afterwards, Dick and Sally Melmoth heard the outer door shut again also: then an ejaculation of amazement, bursting from Taggarty's lips, met their ears;—and this was followed by some hurried and subdued whispering between that individual and the person who had just entered the shop.

"Something's going on," said Dick Melmoth in a low voice to his sister.

But before the woman could make any reply, Taggarty re-appeared, followed by a man so muffled up in a great thick coat, a shawl neckerchief, and a slouched hat, that he was not immediately recognizable. But a presentiment of the truth flashed to the mind of Sally Melmoth: and starting at once from her seat, she exclaimed, "It's Daniel!"

"Yes, it's me safe enough," said the Hangman, in a surly tone, as he laid aside his hat and shawl neckerchief: then having submitted somewhat impatiently to the caresses of his paramour, who was quite maudlin with strong drink,—and after shaking Dick Melmoth by the hand,—he sate down between the astonished pair.

Taggarty hastened to bolt the street-door: then, returning into the parlour, he poured out a tumbler full of gin, which he handed to Coffin, who at once partook of a deep draught.

"Well, I suppose you're rather surprised to see me," said the Hangman, gasping with the effects of the potent fluid which for nearly a minute took away his breath. "No doubt you thought I was dead and gone? I've seen the newspapers, and find that the belief is I was drowned. Well, so much the better. But it's a precious bad job, after all."

"Bad indeed," observed Sal. "I suppose you won't be able to come home again in a hurry?"

"I don't see how the deuce I'm ever to come home again at all," replied the Hangman, his countenance assuming an expression of diabolical ferocity, as if he thought the whole world had turned against him. "There's only two chances for me—and they're not likely to come about."

"What are they?" inquired the Melmoths, speaking as it were in the same breath.

"Why, one is the death of Larry Sampson," answered Coffin: "because if he was out of the way, the other constables could be easily bought over to say they couldn't identify me as the burglar. I know 'em all well enough to be aware of what a ten-pound note would do with each."

"And what is the other chance?" inquired Taggarty.

"Why, if there's somebody to be hung and no one to hang him, some fine morning," returned Coffin, "a free pardon for any past offences would be offered to the individual that would take the place of the executioner: and then I might come forward and step easy enough into my old berth. Those are the two chances: but they're far away off at present and no mistake."

"Less probable things have come about," observed Taggarty.

"Well, we shall see," said Coffin. "Where's Jack?" he demanded, abruptly.

"At home again," answered Dick. "You don't suspect him at all?"

"Not a bit of it," rejoined the Hangman. "He wasn't aware that such a thing was in contemplation at Richmond at all. But I can guess how it was. Me and the footman — poor fellow!—was foolish enough to discuss our plans one night last week in a tap-room at Richmond, where a country bumpkin was getting his supper. We thought he went to sleep after he'd gorged himself with bread and cheese: but he must have shammed, and so overheard what we said. It was infernally stupid on our part: it's cost the poor devil of a footman his life, and made me a sort of exile and wanderer like Cain. Perdition take the whole business!" added Daniel, with savage earnestness.

"But what have you been doing all this time?" asked Dick Melmoth: "and how did you manage to escape drowning?"

"Oh! the tide carried me ashore a little way lower down than where I jumped in," responded Coffin; "and then I cut across to Beechey Manor —you know the place," he observed, with a significant glance at Dick Melmoth. "There I've been hiding until now: but I got so deuced tired of living cooped up in a small bed-room, and the two old servants have shown so much uneasiness at my presence, that I could endure it all no longer. So I got this thick coat, this broad-brimmed hat, and that shawl neckerchief of the old fellow, and resolved to come and pay my friend Bill Taggarty a visit. If you two hadn't been here by accident, I should have got Bill to run down to Fleet Lane and fetch you up to meet me. So now you know all about it."

"But what are you going to do?—and where do you mean to live?" asked Sally Melmoth.

"Well, I haven't exactly made up my mind," returned Coffin. "You must continue at the shop, and let people fancy you still believe me to have been drowned. I have got plenty of blunt—that's one good thing: and it's fortunate it was all in gold, or else the soaking I enjoyed in the Thames would have spoilt flimsy-notes beyond all redemption. Perhaps I shall stay with Bill Taggarty for a time —he's all alone in this house——ain't you, Bill?"

"Yes—I'm all alone," was the chandler's response: but it was given with an evident aversion to the proposed sojourn of the Hangman at his house.

"Or else I shall go over to Bencull's crib at the Folly Bridges," continued the Hangman, not choosing to observe the disinclination of Bill Taggarty to harbour him as a guest.

"Hark!" said the chandler, abruptly: "there's a knock at the street door."

"And rather an impatient one, too," added Daniel Coffin, rising from his seat with evident trepidation. "I musn't be seen here by any body, Bill, you know."

"Then just step up-stairs along with Sal and Dick," said Taggarty, opening a door and thus disclosing a flight of narrow steps formed as it were in a recess. "It may be some one that I must see—and you'll be more quiet up in my bed-room."

The Hangman took up his hat and neckerchief—Sally Melmoth possessed herself of the gin — and Dick laid hands on the glasses: they then all three

AGATHA AND EMMA OWEN.

hastened up-stairs, Taggarty shutting the door behind them. He then proceeded to open the shop-door; and the rays of the candle which he held in his hand, fell full upon the countenance of Mr. Larry Sampson.

The first and most natural thought which instantaneously flashed to the mind of Taggarty, was that the Bow Street Officer had traced the Hangman thither and was come to arrest him; and the chandler's looks accordingly grew troubled, for he felt that he was suddenly involved in no small danger for harbouring the delinquent.

"Good evening, Mr. Taggarty," said Sampson, in his usual quiet manner, and not appearing to notice the confusion of the chandler. "I want to have a little conversation with you if you are disengaged."

"With me, sir?" exclaimed Taggarty, flinging a rapid glance into the street and experiencing some relief on observing that the officer was apparently alone, or at all events had not a posse of constables at his back. "With me, sir?" he repeated, in a less incoherent manner.

"Yes—upon no *professional* business, however," replied Larry, emphatically: for he failed not to observe that his presence was very far from welcome.

"Walk in, sir—walk in," said Taggarty, endeavouring to look as composed and unconcerned as possible: and, having shut and bolted the door again, he conducted the officer into his little parlour. "Pray sit down, Mr. Sampson—let me take your hat—there, make yourself at home, sir. And now, shall it be gin, rum, or brandy?"

"Neither, thank you, Mr. Taggarty," was the response. "I hope I am not intruding upon you at this moment: but you appear to be all alone."

"Oh! yes—quite alone, Mr. Sampson," replied the chandler—but with just a sufficiency of lingering uneasiness to throw some doubt upon the assertion: and as he glanced mechanically towards the door of the staircase, Sampson at once perceived that

although the chandler might have been alone in that room. he assuredly was not alone in the house previous to his (the officer's) arrival.

"I want to speak to you upon a very particular and important matter," said Larry, in a low and confidential tone,—"a matter which, if you can serve me in it, will put a hundred guineas into your pocket."

Taggarty instantaneously thought within himself that Sampson wanted him to betray Daniel Coffin into his hands: and his mind was at once made up not to have anything to do with an affair that would inevitably bring all the Hangman's confederates and accomplices, from every part of London, like a hornet's nest, about his ears. He accordingly said, "If it's any dirty work, Mr. Sampson. I shan't do it."

"I do not think you will look upon it as dirty work when," responded the officer, still speaking in a low and guarded tone. "But tell me frankly whether we can converse in this room without the chance of being overheard."

"Well, there's a young o'oman of my acquaintance up-stairs, doing out the bed-chamber," answered Taggarty: "and if she listens, she may overhear us."

"Then will you step round with me to the nearest public-house?" asked Sampson.

"The truth is I am expecting a friend or two," replied the chandler; "and I can't very well leave. But just say in a whisper what the business is about."

"It is relative to a lad called Jack the Foundling," rejoined the officer, looking Taggarty very hard in the face.

"And what about him?" asked the latter, eagerly.

"That is just the question which I am going to put to you," said Larry. "Now, I want to ascertain all the particulars I can possibly glean concerning the infancy of that lad; and if you will assist me, there are a hundred guineas in my pocket at your service."

"A hundred guineas?" repeated Taggarty, his eyes brightening: "I must sell a great many pen'north of tea and slices of cheese to scrape that sum together! Well, sir, what is it you wish to know?" he asked in a very subdued voice.

"I am already aware," responded Larry, "that a great mystery envelopes the birth of the lad. He was either found or stolen; and it was a boy called James Melmoth who took him, when a babe, to the den in Grub Street, whence you have derived your nickname of the Kinchin-Grand. I also know that the present Richard and Sarah Melmoth, who have been living with the deceased Daniel Coffin, are the brother and sister of that James Melmoth of whom I have spoken, but who has long been dead. I am moreover aware that your late mistress, Shickster Sal, brought up the Foundling."

"Then, if you know all this, Mr. Sampson," said Taggarty, "what more can you expect to glean from me?"—and the chandler now felt easier in his mind, because he saw, from an observation just made by Larry, that he really supposed the Hangman to have been drowned, and that consequently his visit to Mutton Hill at such a moment was purely an accidental coincidence.

"I expect to glean from you any additional information which you may be enabled to impart," said Sampson. "In the first place, endeavour to recollect the precise date on which the babe was brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street."

"It was the 1st of June, 1795," answered Taggarty.

"How do you recollect the date so well?" inquired Larry Sampson.

"Because I remember that it was the day before James Melmoth's father murdered Sir Richard Stamford in Windsor Park, and then blew out his own brains," was Taggarty's response.

"It was not known for some time afterwards that the assassin of the baronet was the same wretched man whose previous enormities had so horrified the metropolis."

"But I knew it was the same man," observed Taggarty, in a scarcely audible whisper; "because his son, young James, told me so at the time. Afterwards I mentioned the circumstance to my pals—it got talked about—and this was the way the public at length knew that James Melmoth, senior, was the assassin of Sir Richard Stamford."

"Now, was not the babe stolen by that man and his son James?" asked Sampson.

"He was," replied Taggarty. "I don't see any harm in telling you the real truth now."

"Certainly not. And it was in Hyde Park that the babe was thus stolen?"

"It was. But you seem to know all about it," said the chandler, in surprise. "Yet I do not see how you can possibly have learnt this: for I have never divulged the secret until now. Neither Dick nor Sal Melmoth knew so much about the business. They were children at the time it happened: but their eldest brother James made me his confidant to a certain extent."

"Did he tell you whose child it was?" asked Sampson.

"No. He had sworn a most solemn oath to his father not to reveal the secret of the child's parentage until it was at least twelve years of age."

"Do you know why the Melmoths stole the child?" demanded Larry.

"Because they had some dreadful spite against its parents, I believe. But you are perhaps aware that young James Melmoth died a violent death within a few days after his father's suicide: and thus in the interval he had not much leisure to be over-communicate with me."

"Is this all you know?" inquired Larry Sampson: then, seeing that Taggarty hesitated, he produced a bag of gold and counted down a hundred guineas upon the table, saying, "If you can give me any farther proofs relative to the circumstances of which we have been speaking, this sum is yours."

"Stop a moment," observed Taggarty. "If the Foundling should turn out to be the son of wealthy or great folks, how do I know but what I shall get into trouble for having been a sort of accessory to the harbouring of him after he was stolen?"

"I will give you a written guarantee that no harm shall befall you," replied Sampson.

"Your word will do, sir," rejoined the chandler. "And now I will fetch you the only proofs that I can put into your hands—but they will no doubt be found convincing enough."

Having thus spoken, Taggarty rose and ascended the staircase, shutting the door carefully behind him. On entering the bed-room up-stairs, he found the Hangman, Dick Melmoth, and Sally, engaged in earnest conversation together upon their future plans and proceedings under existing circumstances: but they were all astounded and alarmed when the

chandler informed them that his guest was none other than the terrible Lawrence Sampson!

In a few hurried words, however, and in a whispered tone, Taggarty explained to them the object of the officer's visit, wherent they were profoundly surprised; but the chandler did not vouchsafe to inform them that Sampson's liberality had extended to a hundred guineas. He was afraid they might claim shares, the matter having reference to the Foundling, in whom they were all interested. He therefore coolly and quietly suppressed an 0, thus reducing the reward from 100 to 10 guineas.

Having given these few hurried explanations, he unlocked a drawer—took out a brown paper parcel—and was about to descend to the parlour again when Daniel Coffin clutched him abruptly by the arm, saying in a hollow whisper "Bill, are you man enough to do me a service?"

"What do you want?" asked Taggarty, recoiling, with an instinctive shudder: for the Hangman's meaning flashed in a moment to his comprehension.

"Larry Sampson is below," replied Coffin: "and those who might have seen him come in, won't be waiting to observe if he ever goes out again," he added with a look of diabolical significancy.

"No, no—I couldn't do it, Dan'el—I couldn't do it!" answered Taggarty, his countenance becoming pale as death, and his knees trembling under him.

"Coward!" ejaculated the Hangman, with bitter ferosity, as he pushed the chandler away from him: then, instantly observing the malignant expression of vindictiveness which appeared upon Taggarty's countenance, he said, "Come, don't be angry, Bill—I didn't mean it! But you must make allowances for one placed in such an infernal predicament as I am."

"Yes, pray don't think any more of it, Bill," said Sally Melmoth, in a tone of earnest entreaty: and Dick also endeavoured to propitiate the chandler.

"You needn't suppose I should betray you, Dan'el," observed Taggarty.

"But will you help me to—to——"

"To make away with Larry Sampson? No!"

And with this emphatic reply, the chandler quitted the room.

Descending to the parlour, he again carefully closed the door of the staircase behind him; and resuming his seat, he opened the brown paper parcel. But his hands trembled visibly—and his cheeks were also still pale and ghastly from the mingled sensations excited by the scene that had just occurred in the bed-chamber above. Larry Sampson, upon whose keenness even the least perceptible emotion was never lost, could not fail to observe an agitation so marked as this: but he affected not to notice it—while all the time he was wondering what could have produced such an impression upon the Kinchin-Grand, and who the person or persons might be that had so produced it.

"What have you got there, Taggarty?" he inquired.

"The clothes the Foundling had on the day he was stolen and brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street," was the answer: then, as Taggarty proceeded to open the parcel and display its contents, he said, "Here's the hat and feathers—the little frock, all covered with neat braiding, somewhat faded now notwithstanding—and here's the petticoats, the little socks, and the tiny shoes. I've always kept them things by me through every vicissitude: for somehow or another, I thought they'd be of service sooner or later."

"You have acted well and wisely," said the officer. "Take the hundred guineas—and I shall keep these things. I suppose you meant me to do so?"

"By all manner of means," replied Taggarty, as he tied up the parcel again. "And now, Mr. Sampson, won't you take a drop of summut short?"

"I would much rather not, thank you," returned Larry. "Good night."

The chandler having hastily gathered up the money and consigned the coin to his pocket, proceeded to unfasten the shop-door to let Mr. Sampson out: and as soon as the officer disappeared, he shut and bolted it again.

But Larry did not immediately quit the neighbourhood. He was resolved to wait and see who the person or persons might be, that were secreted in Mr. Taggarty's upper room. His mode of action was decisively determined on, and promptly carried into execution. Entering the shop of an old-clothes' dealer, to whom he was well known, he remained there only five minutes, and issued forth again completely metamorphosed from head to foot. In fact, he was apparelled as an old woman, with a dark brown cloak, and the hood drawn over his countenance, which was further shaded by a dingy cap having an enormous frill. He carried a bundle of matches in his hand—and in this disguise posted himself exactly opposite the door of the chandler's shop.

Nearly an hour passed: and no one came forth. But several halfpence were thrust into Sampson's hand by poor working-men and their wives returning home, and who took him to be an aged beggar-woman. He was sorry thus to receive the donations of humble charity: but he could not refuse them, for fear of exciting suspicion and perhaps leading to detection and disturbance.

Time passed on—midnight was proclaimed by the iron tongue of Clerkenwell church—and still Larry stayed at his post. He would have remained there till morning, if necessary: but observing no lights in Taggarty's bed-room, he felt assured that the chandler had not as yet retired to rest. Presently the shop door opened—and Taggarty himself appeared upon the threshold, looking anxiously up and down. Sampson, in a whining voice, besought charity: but the chandler, taking no heed of the prayer, retired into the shop. Immediately afterwards a woman came forth as far as the threshold, and also looked intently up and down the narrow street. A light from an opposite window gleamed upon her countenance; and Sampson had no difficulty in recognising Sally Melmoth.

She retired into the shop, the door of which still remained open; and in a few minutes Dick Melmoth, whom Larry also recognised, came forward with the evident object of ascertaining if the coast was clear. Sampson saw that something strange was going on: but of what it was, he had not the most distant suspicion. He nevertheless determined to ascertain the point, if possible—and was rejoiced that he had thus kept watch upon the chandler's premises.

Dick Melmoth having retired again as the others had done, there was another pause in the proceedings: and then, at the expiration of about two minutes, a man hurried forth and sped down the hill towards the Sessions House. He was muffled

in a great thick coat—wore a broad-brimmed hat, much slouched over his features—and all the lower part of his face was concealed in a thick shawl neckerchief.

"Do, dear sir, for the love of heaven, bestow your charity on a poor old woman," said Larry Sampson, with the piteous whine of mendicancy, as he passed close up to the side of the man.

"Get out, you old crone!" growled the fellow, his eyes glaring savagely from beneath the broad-brimmed hat: and, thus speaking, he bolted round the corner—passed behind the Sessions House—and gained Turnmill Street.

For the first time in his life Larry Sampson was thrown quite aback for the moment. His purpose was so far answered that he had succeeded in catching a glimpse of the man's features: but his amazement may be understood when he found that the muffled individual was none other than Daniel Coffin the Hangman! The unmistakable tone of the voice simultaneously confirmed the fact; and if farther proof were wanting, it was at once seen in the circumstance that Dick and Sally Melmoth were at Taggarty's when he issued forth, and that such care had been taken to ascertain that the coast was clear for his exit thence.

Speedily recovering his self-possession, however, Larry Sampson instantaneously revolved in his mind the difficulties of his position. His first impulse was to fling off the old woman's garb and hasten in pursuit: but a rescue was certain to be effected in that vile neighbourhood the instant the alarm of "an officer" should be raised. Moreover, the disguise would be found—Coffin would hear of it and suspect who the old beggar-woman was—and, perceiving that his existence was known, he would either double his precautions against discovery, or else leave the country. On the other hand, to retain the disguise and pursue him in it, would only be to attract certain attention, without frustrating the chances of Coffin's rescue or escape. Sampson therefore retraced his way to his friend the old-clothes dealer—laid aside the cloak and cap—and proceeded homeward, with the intention of losing no time in setting a watch upon all the places and neighbourhoods where the Hangman was likely to conceal himself.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE JOURNEY TO PARIS.

Let us now return to Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen, who had embarked at Woolwich on board a revenue cruiser, to be conveyed to France. They were attended by an elderly gentlewoman who served as a sort of duenna, or guardian, and who had long been intimate with Mrs. Owen, the young ladies' delectable mother. She was a widow—her name was Ranger—and, having no ostensible means of income, was very glad to make money by any means, no matter what intrigue or machination might be involved in the service entrusted to her.

She was not, however, entirely in the secret of the young ladies' mission to the Continent. She knew that they were to enter the household of the Princess of Wales: she was likewise well aware that the Royal Princes had for some time past been frequent visitors at the mansion at Richmond;—and her idea of female virtue was not of such an exalted character as to induce her to suppose that a mere platonic friendship had subsisted between the Misses Owen and the voluptuary-sons of George III. The construction she therefore put upon the matter was that the young ladies, having bestowed their favours upon the Princes, were rewarded by obtaining, through their indirect influence and recommendations, lucrative posts in the household of the Princess of Wales.

Mrs. Ranger herself was the most plausible woman in existence, though in reality a perfect Hecate of iniquity. She was indeed ten thousand times worse than Mrs. Owen suspected her to be. This lady fancied that she was merely an astute, clever, and shrewd woman,—not over particular how she made money nor in what service she was enlisted,—but fully trustworthy by an employer: whereas Mrs. Ranger was in reality a thoroughly unprincipled, artful, and abandoned wretch, capable of selling the charms and making a market of the young girls confided to her care. She had smiled inwardly when Mrs. Owen, on giving her last instructions, had enjoined her to keep a careful watch over the virtue of her daughters: but externally she had assumed a matronly and duenna-like air, confirming with the most sacred assurances the impression which this staid and cautious aspect had left upon the mother's mind.

Her personal appearance was as false as her mind. She used cosmetics with so elaborate a skill and so ingeniously supplied the faded charms and wrinkled deformities of nature with the succedaneous remedies of art, that her withered form assumed a buxom shape and her countenance bore a richer bloom than ever had clothed it even in the spring-tide of her youth. She was midway between fifty and sixty: but what with false hair, false teeth, and the various artificial appliances alluded to, she managed to pass herself off as at least ten years younger.

It will be remembered that Mary Owen had withdrawn herself from any farther share in the secret conspiracy hatched under royal auspices against the honour, happiness, and even life of the Princess Caroline of Wales: Agatha, Emma, and Julia accordingly embarked without their youngest sister at Woolwich, under the protection of Mrs. Ranger. As a matter of course, they were accompanied by no end of trunks, hand-boxes, and packages—for, as the reader has already been informed, large sums were expended in giving the young ladies a handsome equipment for their new career. A government vessel had been appointed to convey them to Calais—for the power of steam was not in those days applied to navigation, and the ordinary means of reaching the Continent was by sailing-packet or hoy from Dover.

We should here pause for a moment to observe that this was the epoch of Napoleon's memorable abdication of the imperial dignity in France, and his retreat to the little sovereignty of Elba. Louis XVIII had been restored to his throne, an infamous Bourbon being thus given back to France: peace prevailed in Europe—and numerous English tourists were taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities to visit the continental countries.

The voyage from Woolwich to Calais was performed in about thirty hours, with a calm sea but a wind not altogether favourable. Mrs. Ranger was so ill, notwithstanding the smoothness of the passage, as to be compelled to keep her berth the whole time: but during daylight the three sisters remained upon the deck, conversing gaily and affably with the officers belonging to the vessel. On arriving at Dessin's hotel at Calais, the party was compelled to make a halt for a couple of days in order to enable Mrs. Ranger to recruit herself thoroughly ere she entered upon the formidable task of posting to Paris.

It was on a Wednesday afternoon that the Misses Owen and their duenna embarked at Woolwich: it was on the Thursday evening that they reached Calais—and it was not until Sunday morning that they proposed to resume their journey. Now, if the reader will refer to earlier chapters, he will find that it was on the Friday Jocelyn Loftus bade adieu to Louisa, with whom Mary Owen remained, at Canterbury; and we must add that it was on the Saturday that, having crossed in the sailing-packet from Dover to Calais, he also took up his quarters at Dessin's hotel.

We must remind our reader that this amiable, intelligent, and excellent young gentleman, ere setting out on his chivalrous enterprise, had pledged himself to Mary Owen not only to compromise her sisters as little as might be in the task he had undertaken, but also to use every attempt to persuade them to withdraw from the execrable service in which they were engaged. It was therefore his settled intention, on setting out upon his journey, to overtake them as speedily as possible—endeavour to form their acquaintance—and become their travelling-companion if opportunity should serve. For the farther development of his plans he naturally trusted to circumstances and to the chapter of accidents: but he was resolved to leave no stone unturned in order to rescue the Misses Owen from the abhorrent influences that now ruled their career, or at all events warn the Princess of Wales of the snake-like perils and insidious snares that were scattered in her path.

On arriving at Dessin's hotel late on Saturday evening, and on making inquiries of the waiter as to whether certain ladies had passed that way within the last day or two, Jocelyn was well pleased to learn that they were actually at the moment beneath the same roof. He also ascertained that they were to leave in a post-chaise on the following morning for Paris. He then asked whether he also could be accommodated with a travelling-chariot at about the same hour: but he learnt to his mortification that in consequence of the great influx of English visitors during the week, every disposable chaise and carriage in the town had been put into requisition, and that the one kept for Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen was the very last which could be obtained. There was however the chance of return-carriages arriving; and the waiter confidently promised one for the Monday.

Jocelyn however assured him that it was of the highest importance for him not only to depart on the following morning, but also to travel on to Paris without delay—and hence his desire to obtain a post-chaise instead of proceeding by the *diligence*, or stage-coach. The waiter looked at the young gentleman very attentively; and suspecting that he wished to become the travelling companion of the ladies, he adroitly hinted that such was his belief. This hint was given with the unmistakable manner of one who indirectly and covertly proffers his assistance to forward the design into which he penetrates: and Jocelyn, knowing the readiness of waiters in general, and French ones in particular, to perform such little services, at once said to the man, "Ten *louis* shall be your reward if you can induce those ladies of whom we have been speaking to accommodate me with a seat in their post-chaise."

The waiter spoke not a word, but with a significant look quitted the apartment. It was time to serve the ladies' supper; and as he attended upon them at the repast, Mrs. Ranger enjoined him to have the chaise in readiness at nine in the morning. He promised due observance of her command; and as she spoke French with fluency—as indeed did Agatha, Emma, and Julia—she made many inquiries about the condition of the roads, the probable state of the weather, the best hotels to stop at, and the chances of travellers being assailed by robbers. The waiter responded to all these queries satisfactorily enough, except the last; and, with a considerable amount of apparent hesitation, he observed that the recent disbanding of a large number of the troops had thrown many desperate characters idle upon the world—that there were certainly cases of travellers being stopped—he was not even sure but that the outrage sometime occurred in the broad day-light—and that at all events it was much safer and more prudent for ladies to journey with a male protector.

These remarks, cunningly dropped, and instilling fear rather by innuendo than positive averments, produced the desired effect upon the ladies. Mrs. Ranger declared that she would much prefer the *diligence* to a post-chaise: Agatha would not hear of the stage-coach, but regretted that "mamma" had not provided them with a male attendant;—Emma sided with Mrs. Ranger relative to the propriety of travelling by the *diligence*—and Julia at once expressed a wish that they were acquainted with some gentleman who could accompany them. It was now that the waiter, as if struck by a sudden recollection, "took the liberty of observing that there was an English gentleman at that moment in the hotel, who was most anxious to travel post to Paris, but who could not obtain a conveyance:" and then, as if quite in a style of indifferent comment, the astute *garçon* continued to remark that "the young gentleman was certainly the handsomest, most agreeable, and most fascinating specimen of English travellers that had visited the hotel since the peace."

All this was quite enough to enlist the interest of the ladies on behalf of one who was so much pressed for the means of rapid conveyance to Paris: and moreover, they wanted a travelling-companion. Julia thought there could be no harm in offering their fellow-countryman a seat in their chaise: Emma expressed her opinion that it would be rude not to do so;—and Agatha still more emphatically insisted upon the propriety of asking him to join their party. Mrs. Ranger said in a bland tone that she saw no objection, provided he was *a real gentleman*: and the waiter's guarantee being taken in this respect, the said waiter was

duly and formally charged to conduct the negotiation.

Accordingly, this important plenipotentiary—doubtless fancying himself no mean imitation of the astute diplomatist Talleyrand—returned to Jocelyn's sitting-room; and the moment he made his appearance, his looks proclaimed the success of his enterprise. Loftus was well pleased thereat, and cheerfully paid the promised fee of ten *louis*, which the waiter still more joyfully consigned to his pocket.

Jocelyn then retired to his bed-chamber, and soon fell asleep, to dream of his beloved and lovely Louisa: while, on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger and her three fair charges sought their own apartments, well pleased with the prospect of an agreeable travelling-companion during their journey to Paris.

On the following morning Mr. Loftus received an invitation to breakfast with the ladies: and he was forthwith conducted to the room in which they were assembled. At the first glance which he threw upon Agatha, Emma, and Julia, the sentiment of mingled pity and indignation was deepened in his soul to think that such beautiful creatures should have become entangled in such detestable intrigues. He was however far from suspecting that beneath the air of lively, good-tempered artlessness which was natural to them, and which corrupting influences had not as yet materially impaired, there lurked all the nascent tendencies and inclinations towards that thorough depravity which the denizens of fashionable life are so skilled in veiling with smiles, affability, and the glitter of fascinating manners—as the hideousness of a corpse may be concealed with flowers. He believed them to be the unconscious and beguiled victims, rather than the now willing instruments, of the vilest machinations: and little suspecting that even their very maiden virtue and personal chastity had been sacrificed in the course of execrable training which they had undergone, he hoped to rescue them from the ways of intrigue and dishonour and render them worthy, as they were certainly brilliant, members of society.

Such were the thoughts which swept through the mind of Jocelyn Loftus on his introduction to the Misses Owen: but as for Mrs. Ranger, he experienced a thorough and unmitigated contempt for her ere he had been three minutes in her society. Not that he at once saw into the depths of her character: but he read enough, through the veil of plausibility wherewith she invested her words and her manners, to assure himself that she was false, hollow-hearted, vain, and cunning. This feeling of dislike he however studiously concealed: for it by no means suited his purpose to make an enemy of that lady at the very outset of their acquaintance.

The impression which his own appearance produced upon the ladies was at once of the most favourable character. His exceedingly handsome person, endowed with all the beauty and graces of youthful manhood—his elegant manners—the tones of his voice—and the unaffected yet fascinating style of his conversation and choice of language, could not fail to prove agreeable to an old coquette and three lively, animated, and impassioned girls. He was accordingly received with an evident welcome, whose warmth was only subdued by that habit of external formality which was rather practised from the ceremonial usages of drawing-rooms than really felt in all its rigid reserve.

The conversation at the breakfast-table was sprightly and sparkling: but the meal was somewhat hurried as the chaise was announced to be in readiness even before the party sate down. Then came the hurry and bustle of the preliminaries for departure: but as Jocelyn attended to the disposal of the luggage, a world of trouble, as Mrs. Ranger observed to the girls, was fortunately taken off their hands.

French travelling carriages, or *berlines*, are spacious and commodious vehicles, containing six persons inside without the necessity of much crowding. There was consequently ample room for the whole party. Mrs. Ranger and Julia occupied the back seat: Jocelyn was placed between the two elder girls on the front one. He had Agatha on his right hand, and Emma on his left: but though in such charming contact, his heart wavered not in its allegiance to the loved and absent Louisa—and he felt that it never would. Much rather would he have been at this moment with his betrothed: but he had undertaken a certain duty—and his present position was only one of the inevitable phases of that enterprise in which he had so generously and chivalrously embarked.

The equipage rolled out of the court-yard of Dessin's hotel—the drawbridge of the ramparts was crossed—and the vehicle, drawn by four horses with two postilions, entered on the broad road leading to Boulogne. Mrs. Ranger now thought it high time to let Jocelyn know that her three fair charges were proceeding to Italy in order to enter the service of the Princess of Wales: whereupon the young gentleman observed that he also was bound on a visit to the same sunny clime, giving his hearers to understand that his was a tour of recreation and pleasure, although in the first instance he had some important business to transact in Paris.

The eyes of the young ladies shone with unmistakable joy when they thus heard that their new acquaintance was proceeding all the way to Italy; and Mrs. Ranger inquired how long he purposed to remain in the French capital. He answered that a couple of days would suffice for the business which he had to conclude in that city: whereupon Agatha remarked how singular it was that *they* also intended to limit their halt in Paris to an equally brief period. The observation was too significant not to be seized upon as available for Jocelyn's purpose; and he expressed a hope that he might be permitted the honour of escorting the ladies as far as their destination in Italy. The proposition was received with many expressions of gratitude and much evident delight: but Jocelyn was somewhat surprised as well as secretly vexed and annoyed, when he observed that Agatha, the eldest sister, gazed upon him with a certain subdued tenderness as she breathed her thanks for the proposal he had just made.

He could not even help looking earnestly at her for a moment in order to assure himself that he had rightly interpreted the meaning of her gaze: but as her eyes fell beneath his own, and a fleeting blush appeared upon her cheeks, he fancied that he must have been deceived, and regretted

having thus regarded her in a manner which she might consider as savouring of rudeness or impertinence. But as the conversation turned upon different topics, it became clearly apparent that she had taken no offence: for she treated Jocelyn with a friendly but well-bred courtesy, as much as to imply that since it was agreed they were to be travelling companions on a very long journey, there was no necessity to regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few hours. At least, such was the interpretation which the young gentleman now put upon her demeanour, as well as on the bearing of her two sisters and Mrs. Ranger: and as it was his object to gain the good opinion and the confidence of the three girls as speedily as was practicable under the circumstances, he of course encouraged all their friendly advances.

Thus by the time the party reached Boulogne to lunch, the ladies were already on very good terms with their handsome travelling-companion: and when they stopped in the evening to dine at Bernay, it would have seemed as if they had been acquainted for a whole year instead of a single day. Indeed Jocelyn was more than once inwardly and secretly vexed at the somewhat meaning looks of tenderness which Agatha cast upon him: but as those side-long and furtive glances were instantaneously withdrawn when she saw that they were noticed, he tranquillised himself with the hope that any feeling which the young lady might have so suddenly conceived towards him, would not be conveyed by a more marked demonstration.

After dinner the journey was resumed towards Abbeville, where it was proposed to rest for the night. The sun sank into its western home—and obscurity veiled the road which our travellers were pursuing. Mrs. Ranger got nervous about robbers, upon the chances of an attack from whom she would nevertheless persist in talking—while Julia, already much wearied, dozed by her side. Jocelyn sustained the conversation with the old lady and Emma: but Agatha had gradually ceased to take part in the discourse, and soon became altogether silent.

It was very dark inside the vehicle: and Jocelyn soon experienced a new cause for annoyance. For while he was endeavouring to reason Mrs. Ranger out of her fears, which, whether affected or not, seemed to be augmenting, he felt Agatha's head gently droop upon his shoulder. It was true that she had on a plain travelling-bonnet, so that the silk material alone came in contact with him: but still his extreme sense of propriety made him shrink from anything that appeared to approach an undue familiarity. He nevertheless fancied that she must have fallen asleep, and therefore had unconsciously lain her head upon his shoulder: and as the circumstances of travelling may in such cases somewhat mitigate the strict observances to be followed on ordinary occasions, he made due allowances for the present little incident and offered not to disturb his fair companion.

But in a few minutes he felt her head gradually moving: then it became still again—and then she suddenly, but noiselessly turned in such a way that her cheek rested against his own. He started—but not enough to compel her to shift her position: and then astonished that she did not, he gently drew back, so that while his face no longer touched her own, her head nevertheless remained upon his shoulder. Mrs. Ranger ceased talking at the moment; and he listened attentively to ascertain whether Agatha was sleeping or not. But her breath came not as from the lips of a sleeper: and shocked at an occurrence which he was now forced to regard as a deliberate, intended, and most indiscreet proceeding, if not a positive overture, on her part, he drew still farther aside. Agatha thereupon abruptly raised her head, and gave vent to an ejaculation as if just awaking from a doze.

Jocelyn was now again bewildered, and in deep perplexity what to think. After all, she might have really been sleeping, though he fancied she was not: and, prompted by his generous nature to put the most charitable construction upon the deeds of his fellow-creatures,—unwilling, moreover, to be precipitate or rash in attributing aught savouring of gross indelicacy to a young and gay-hearted girl,—he brought his mind to settle the point in her favour. Still, when he reflected upon all that Mary Owen had told him, his misgivings were again aroused; and the painful conviction was forced upon him that the training to which the unfortunate sisters had been subjected by their unnatural mother, was indeed sufficient to destroy all their moral principles, even if its effect had not as yet been to ruin their chastity.

But while Jocelyn was thus painfully giving way to his meditations, and almost regretting that he had joined the company of the ladies, he soon became sensible of another source of vexation. For be it observed that, in consequence of occupying a place in the carriage between Agatha and Emma, while he was withdrawing himself from the contact of the former he was unconsciously pressing against the latter: then, as he drew more and more away from the eldest sister in the manner already described, his pressure against Emma became all the closer. This circumstance he did not immediately perceive in the confusion of his ideas: but to Emma that pressure appeared full of a tender meaning. She felt his form coming in nearer contact with her own—and a thrill of pleasure shot through her entire frame. But still she stayed perfectly still, in a tantalizing uncertainty as to whether the occurrence were accidental or not. In a few moments the pressure against her grew more apparently decisive—and the wanton blood now coursed like lightning through Emma's veins. Jocelyn's left arm pressed against her bosom, which heaved and swelled to a contact which she believed was intentional: and with a voluptuous ardour she pressed against him in return. At that instant was it that Agatha raised her head and gave vent to an ejaculation as if she were starting from a doze—and then the pressure between Jocelyn and Emma suddenly ceased.

But still the impression remained in Emma's mind that the occurrence which had just taken place, was deliberate and intentional on Jocelyn's part: and she waited a few minutes in the anxious hope that the presumed demonstration of tenderness would be continued. It was not, however—for Agatha was now lounging back in her own corner, and Loftus was no longer inconvenienced for room. Emma therefore gently and gradually pressed towards him,—now pausing for the tacit response so anxiously awaited—then pressing closer still, until the contours of her well-developed bust heaved amorously against his arm. All in a moment

the truth flashed to Jocelyn's mind—once more he started abruptly—and the second temptress as abruptly shrank back into her own corner, complaining of the ruggedness of the road and the jolting of the carriage.

Almost immediately afterwards the vehicle entered Abbeville: and in the bustle occasioned by the examination of the passports at the town-gates—the arrival at the hotel—the handing the ladies out of the carriage—the duty of looking after their luggage and his own—and then the task of giving orders to the waiters, &c.,—in the excitement of these manifold proceedings, we say, Jocelyn for the time lost sight of the previous topic of his unpleasant meditations.

Almost immediately after their arrival at the inn, the ladies withdrew to the chambers prepared for them—and Loftus was equally ready to seek repose. Before he however fell asleep, the behaviour of the two eldest Misses Owen recurred to his memory; and it was while still perplexing himself with arguments for and against a deliberate intention on their part, that slumber visited his eyes.

When the travellers were reunited in the morning at the breakfast table, neither Agatha nor Emma appeared in any way confused on meeting his looks—nor was their behaviour at all changed towards him, unless indeed it were that their tone and manner increased in friendliness. But there was no evidence of humiliated feeling on their part, as if they were conscious of having made overtures which were met with a tacit rebuke.

The journey was resumed,—Mrs. Ranger and the youngest girl occupying the same seat as before, and Jocelyn being again placed between the two eldest sisters, with their backs to the horses. The young gentleman now endeavoured to turn the conversation upon the Princess of Wales,—observing how harshly she had been treated by her royal husband, the Prince Regent—and regretting, if it were only for the sake of their child, the Princess Charlotte, that they did not effect a reconciliation and live together. But he found the three sisters very guarded in their replies and still more sparing in their comments—while Mrs. Ranger, who had passed a bad night, dozed in her corner of the carriage. At length Agatha, with an appearance of natural liveliness and versatility of disposition, exclaimed, "Let us talk of something else—for this is an old and hackneyed topic amongst us:"—and Loftus was accordingly compelled to turn the discourse into another chanel.

He found the three sisters well-informed, accomplished, and intelligent: their good-humour was patent beyond the possibility of affectation;—they did not indulge in scandal, nor frivolous disquisitions on dress—nor were they at all vain of the intimacy which they had enjoyed with the Royal Princes. They possessed many excellent qualities, it was clear: but how far their morals had been depraved and their principles undermined, Jocelyn trembled to conjecture. When, however, he thought of the admirable purposes to which their minds and their dispositions might have been trained under proper tutelage,—and when he reflected that whatever might be their fallings and faults, these poor girls could scarcely be held responsible for them,—his heart was moved to the deepest commiseration, and he felt that it would be a glorious triumph to rescue them from the evil influences that were hurrying them on to destruction.

The party stopped to dine at Beauvais in the afternoon—and in the evening at Beaumont, to take an early supper. The journey was then speedily continued: and once more did the shades of night envelop the landscape in obscurity, and plunge the interior of the carriage into almost utter darkness. Jocelyn actually drew himself into as small a compass as possible, so as not to encroach in the slightest degree upon the space allotted to his fair companions on the same seat: but he soon became aware of certain little tacit overtures from either side—a pressure of the knee against his own, or the heaving of a bosom against his shoulder. He felt that his position was alike false and ridiculous: and he became dispirited, and even gloomy. He was surrounded by temptations which he had ample strength of mind and rectitude of principle to resist: and yet he had embarked in an enterprise which compelled him to remain in this very position and subject to these temptations. That the little overtures,—sly, artful, and tacit as they were,—were intentional and deliberate, he could no longer doubt: and it became a question whether he was not compromising himself too far, and entering upon the verge of outrage against the pure love which he felt for Louisa Stanley, by remaining any longer in the company of these syrens whose temperaments were evidently so warm and whose morals were becoming every instant more open to the gravest suspicion.

Finding that they received no encouragement from the young gentleman, Agatha and Emma presently desisted from their tacit approaches and silent demonstrations of tenderness towards him. The discourse grew languid, and soon dropped altogether—every one, save Jocelyn, falling off into a doze. But he himself continued to meditate upon the perplexing situation in which he was placed: and there were but two alternatives for him to choose between. He must either withdraw himself from the company of the syren sisters, and thus break the promise he had pledged to Mary that he would endeavour to rescue them from their present career: or he must remain with them, even at the risk of encountering overtures which pained, insulted, and shocked him. In the former case, he would have nothing more to do than hasten on to Italy and give the necessary warning to the Princess, leaving the three sisters to fulfil their ignoble destiny: in the latter case, he might perhaps find speedy opportunities of conversing with each one alone and separately, and thence judge whether the work of reform were really practicable in reference to them, or whether they were trammelled and ensnared by circumstances and influences beyond all hope of redemption.

Jocelyn decided upon the adoption of the latter alternative of the two which we have named: at all events he determined to see what results the couple of days' sojourn together in Paris would produce.

It was eleven o clock when the post-chaise entered the French capital: and it proceeded straight to Meurice's Hotel, which was in those times situated in the Rue St. Honoré. Wearied and exhausted with the long journey of two days, Mrs. Ranger and the three sisters lost no time in seeking repose: but ere Jocelyn retired to rest, he sate down and penned

a long letter to his well-beloved Louisa,—for he felt a profound longing thus to commune with the dear one, by committing to paper all the tender things and fond assurances which he would have breathed in her ears had they been together.

CHAPTER LV.

FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY.

Mrs. Ranger and Julia occupied the same sleeping-apartment at the Hotel Meurice; while Agatha and Emma shared another.

The chamber-maid had been ordered to rouse them at nine o'clock in the morning: and accordingly, if we peep about half-an-hour later into the chamber tenanted by the two eldest sisters, we shall find them in the midst of the avocations of the toilette.

"Now what think you of our handsome travelling companion, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus?" inquired Agatha, as she combed out her long brown hair before the immense mirror in which her whole person was reflected, as she stood with naked shoulders and bare bosom in an attitude of indescribable voluptuousness and unstudied grace.

"I think that he is the handsomest young man I ever beheld in all my life," answered Emma, who was lacing on her corset in front of another mirror which reproduced with equal fidelity all the rich contours and fine proportions of her own softly sensuous form.

"But what else do you think of him, Emma?" inquired her eldest sister.

"I scarcely know how to answer you," was the response.

"Should you like to have him as a lover?"

"Yes—but not as a husband."

"And wherefore not as a husband?" inquired Agatha.

"Because I think he is too particular. He seems a very moral young man," returned Emma, laughing.

"Ah! have you been tempting him, then, you wicked girl?" asked Agatha, also smiling roguishly.

"Have you?" demanded Emma. "Come—let us confess. You and I have no secrets from each other."

"I hope not," observed Agatha. "Well, I am bound to admit that the contact of his handsome person did somewhat confuse and bewilder my ideas and excite my passions—and—and—I suffered him to perceive that he was not displeasing to me. In plain terms, I laid my head upon his shoulder—this was in the evening of the first day's journey——"

"And did he reward you with a soft and noiseless kiss?" asked Emma, her bosom heaving visibly in the mirror where it was reflected, and the soft flush of desire tinging her cheeks.

"On the contrary—he seemed either not to understand my meaning, or else to be indifferent," answered Agatha. "Nay—I am not quite sure that he did not positively repulse me—but very gently—and rather by withdrawing himself from me than by pushing me from him."

"Oh! he withdrew, did he?" exclaimed Emma, a light breaking in upon her mind. "Then did I fall into a most eggregious error—for as he retreated from you, he pressed against me, and I fancied that the pressure was intentional."

"And you returned it?" said Agatha, in a voice full of deep sensuousness—for the bare idea of these amorous overtures heated her blood and inflamed her imagination, so that the carnation deepened upon her cheeks—her hazel eyes swam in liquid languor—and her fine bust swelled and sank like the undulating motion of the sea.

"I returned that pressure—in fact, I gave Jocelyn Loftus to understand precisely what you did," said Emma, in response to her sister's question. "I let him know as plainly as I dared that if he were bold and venturous, I should not prove timid nor cruel."

"And the result?" exclaimed Agatha, hastily.

"The same as in your case," was the reply.

"Last evening, in the carriage, I renewed my little artifices," observed Agatha; "and with an equal futility. When we descended from the carriage and entered the room where the lights were blazing, I scarcely dared look him in the face: but I was resolved not to seem humiliated——"

"That was precisely the feeling which I experienced," exclaimed Emma. "But do you think that Jocelyn is a perfect anchorite—or that he rejects our overtures because he is smitten with Julia?"

"I scarcely know what to think," responded Agatha. "But I do not fancy that he is inclined to pay any particular attention to Julia: and as for a young man of two or three and twenty years being an anchorite, is not the most probable theory to fall back upon. He may possess very lofty notions of honour——"

"He evidently does possess them," observed Emma. "And is therefore loath to engage in an intrigue with young ladies who are to a certain extent under his protection," added the eldest sister.

"Very likely. Or else he is afraid of that old harridan Ranger," suggested Emma.

"Far from it," exclaimed Agatha. "He experiences for her the most sovereign contempt, although he endeavours to conceal it. But I have marked the curl of his beautifully chiselled lip—Oh! what classic lips——"

"And such a faultless Grecian face, with that clear rich brown complexion," observed Emma. "His hair, too, is magnificent—dark as jet and as glossy as a woman's. Then his teeth—your's and mine are not whiter nor more even——"

"And that is paying ourselves a compliment at the same time," said Agatha, laughing so as to display the rows of pearl which shone between her red and juicy lips. "But did you ever behold such splendid eyes as Jocelyn's? Ah! when I think o that fat, puffy, bloated Prince, and then fix my thoughts upon Jocelyn, it seems as if I had submitted to the pawings of a great imp and now vainly sigh for the embraces of an Apollo!"

"Nor can I reflect lovingly upon the Duke of York's image," said Emma, "when that of Jocelyn is uppermost in my mind. I wonder whether Julia is smitten by him—and whether she thinks of her Duke of Cumberland in constrast with our handsome fellow-traveller. And yet," exclaimed Emma, suddenly laughing gaily and turning towards Agatha, "it is not every trio of sisters who have had three Princes as their lovers——"

"And paramours," added the eldest girl: then, with a subdued sigh, she observed in a tone that altered strangely all in a moment, "Do you know, Emma, I am very much afraid——"

"Oh! I can guess what you are about to say!" exclaimed Emma, with a subdued shriek and look of dismay. "Heavens! is it possible?"

"I am afraid so," replied Agatha, mournfully. "But do not speak so loud—do not give vent to ejaculations: we may be overheard! And when I think of it, don't mention it to Julia: for should my fears prove correct, the fewer confidants the better."

"How in the name of heaven will you manage, my dear girl?" inquired Emma, still contemplating her sister with mingled anguish and dismay.

"Oh! if it be really the case, I can conceal the fact for a long time to come," answered Agatha: "and then I must trust to circumstances to point out the means of avoiding eventual discovery. It is not so difficult on the Continent as it is in England to manage these matters: midwives are more accomplished in France and Italy—and also more knowing and less scrupulous," she added, with a significant look.

"I understand you," observed Emma. "But——"

"Do not let us talk any more about it now, my love," said Agatha, suddenly brightening up. "If the worst comes to the worst, the Prince Regent must support his child—for his it assuredly will be. You know, Emma, that I have never as yet yielded to the embrace of any other——"

"And the Prince must know it likewise," was the response. "For my part, I should be fearfully shocked and alarmed if I thought that my amour with the Duke of York was likely to bring me into disgrace."

"And yet you are ready to plunge headlong into an amour with Jocelyn Loftus," exclaimed Agatha, laughing—for the natural gaiety of her disposition soon returned.

"Ah! but he is so very handsome!" murmured Emma, with a deep sigh of mingled pleasure and ardent longing. "It is however quite clear that we cannot both win him to our arms—to one only must the triumph and the happiness belong——"

"Let me have a fair opportunity of plying him with the artillery of my fascinations," said Agatha; "and if I discover that his heart is proof, I will abandon him to your seductive wiles."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Emma. "And after all—even supposing that you should be in the way to become a mother—it is much better to make up one's mind to lead a life of pleasure and gaiety, especially as we cannot hope to make very excellent marriages: for our reputation has been assuredly damaged by our intimacy with the Princes."

"And therefore," added the eldest sister, with the coolness of settled depravity, "if we have the character of being no better than we should be, let us also have the enjoyment."

"Upon that point, Agatha," observed Emma, "you and I have already agreed; otherwise we should not be discoursing so confidentially, so unreservedly, and so frankly as we are doing now. But to return to the handsome Jocelyn—what opportunity do you require? and how can I succour you?"

"Contrive to get Mrs. Ranger and Julia to accompany you shopping this afternoon, if possible," replied Agatha: "and I will remain in-doors with Jocelyn. He will not offer to escort you if you expressly say you are going out shopping."

"Leave it to me," said Emma. "I suppose that after breakfast we shall all sally forth in company to see *the lions*: then we shall return to luncheon——"

"And afterwards I shall feel too tired to go out again before dinner," observed Agatha. "As for Mrs. Ranger, I am very certain that instead of standing in the way of an intrigue, she would wink at it—especially if a few guineas were slipped into her hands. Oh! I have fathomed that woman's character far more deeply than our mother has done."

"But mamma is very credulous in some things," observed Emma,—"although so very astute and cunning in others. The idea of throwing us constantly in the way of the Princes, and expecting that we should pass with impunity through the fiery furnace!"

"It was most preposterous!" exclaimed Agatha. "But here is Julia."

"What! not dressed yet?" cried this young lady, as she entered the room. "I have been up for the last hour—and should have come to chat with you, if that dreadful old creature, Mrs. Ranger, had not kept me to help her put herself together. I never knew such a painted sepulchre as she is—such a made-up specimen of self-modernised antiquity. But, by the bye, I have not until now had an opportunity of asking you both what you think of our travelling-companion?"

"That is the very subject we have been discussing for the last hour, Julia," replied Agatha. "We both consider him uncommonly handsome, agreeable, and fascinating. Indeed, for myself, I infinitely prefer him to the Prince of Wales—Emma likes him much better than the Duke of York——"

"And I now regard the Duke of Cumberland as a perfect ourang-outang of ugliness in comparison with this Adonis of a Jocelyn," observed Julia, with a gentle sigh.

"Has he exhibited any tenderness towards you?" inquired Agatha.

"Not the least!" she answered, in surprise at the question. "What made you think so?"

"Because he has rejected certain little overtures which Emma and I have made towards him," responded the eldest sister: "and therefore we fancied that he must either have experienced a preference for you, or else must be proof against our witcheries altogether."

"What! a handsome young man feel no passion!" exclaimed Julia: "and three pretty girls unable to thaw the ice of his heart! It's too absurd."

"So we think," rejoined Agatha; "and therefore we are going to lay siege to him in our turns. I first—Emma second—and you third, Julia, if we fail."

"Be it so," said the youngest of the three sisters.

And after this delectable conversation, they descended to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn was already seated, deep in the perusal of a French newspaper. Mrs. Ranger shortly made her appearance; and during the repast the plans of the day were settled. It was arranged that immediately after breakfast they should all proceed together to visit some of the principal buildings—that they should return to luncheon at three—that in the afternoon those who had purchases to make should go out shopping—and that in the evening the whole party should visit some theatre.

Jocelyn had been in Paris before—as had also Mrs. Ranger: they were consequently well able to conduct the young ladies to all the most remarkable sights in the French metropolis—and a few hours were thus passed agreeably enough. They returned to Meurice's shortly after three o'clock: and during lunch-time Emma inquired who proposed to accompany her on a visit to the milliners', jewellers', and other fashionable repositories. Mrs. Ranger was of course indispensable to such a tour, which required her knowledge of Paris—and Julia was prompt in giving an affirmative answer. But Agatha, pleading a slight head-ache, expressed her intention of remaining in-doors until the evening: and Jocelyn said not a word. He was however well pleased at thus finding an opportunity of discoursing alone with one of the sisters.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia went up to dress again; and Agatha inquired gaily whether Mr. Loftus meant to stay and keep her company. He replied that he proposed to do himself that honour: and Agatha turned suddenly away to conceal the flush of mingled joy and sensuous anticipation which she felt burning upon her cheeks. Observing that she must leave him for a few minutes, in order to help her sister Emma at the afternoon's toilette, she hurried from the apartment.

"Jocelyn will remain with me," she said, in a tone of triumph, as she entered the chamber to which Emma had preceded her. "And now, then, let me make the most of the charms which heaven has given me."

She selected a dress which, without being too fine or in any way gaudy, was of surpassing elegance:

and being made after the most approved fashion of the day, it was cut so low in the body as to leave the shoulders entirely bare and reveal so much of the bust that the imagination had but little trouble in filling up the remainder of the glowing picture. She was not above the middle height, though a little taller than Emma: but there was more dignity in her gait than in that of her sister—and the statuesque carriage of her neck and shoulders gave her bosom, naturally fine, the grandest development. This she knew full well: and hence her selection of a dress which displayed her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. But she threw over her shoulders a gauze kerchief—thus flimsily veiling the beauties which, with all the accomplished artifices of coquetry, she really intended to be seen.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia sallied forth together; and Agatha returned to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn had remained. The moment she made her appearance in that seductive manner, her aim and object flashed to the mind of Loftus; and, though his looks betrayed not his sentiments, he inwardly experienced a mingled pain and disgust at this too brazen evidence of a deep depravity. For an instant he was inclined to abandon the self-imposed task of reforming the three sisters as utterly hopeless; but then the feeling of pity for their unhappy destiny returned to his soul—and, likewise remembering his pledge to Mary, he resolved to prosecute an undertaking which was nevertheless accompanied by so many incidents that shocked his upright character and wounded his generous heart.

Throwing herself with a voluptuous negligence upon a sofa, she darted a look all vibrating with desire upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, taking a chair near her, paid no attention to the studied but apparently involuntary display of charms and fascinations the artillery of which was now directed against him.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a calm but serious voice, and without looking at her, "I purposely sought the opportunity of this interview."

"Indeed!" she murmured, her heart suddenly beating with transport at what she instantaneously took as an avowal, and which seemed at the moment to promise her a far more easy victory than she had expected: and the colour came and went in rapid transitions upon her very beautiful countenance.

"I have behaved with some little duplicity towards you," continued Loftus, still keeping his eyes averted: "but the moment for serious explanation is now come."

"And why should they be so serious?" asked the young lady, in a low and tremulous tone the tenderness of which at once struck Jocelyn and convinced him that his prefatory remark had been entirely mistaken.

For suddenly turning his eyes, in mingled amazement, pity, and pain, upon Agatha, he saw that the kerchief had fallen away from her shoulders, and that she was leaning towards him with all the nude display of her luxuriant charms and with a profound wantonness in her looks.

"Miss Owen," he at once exclaimed, turning aside with an impatience almost amounting to disgust,—"let us understand each other. It is purely and simply upon a matter of business that I propose to address you; and the explanations I have to give are of a very serious character, I can assure you."

"But I am in no humour for serious discourse, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a tone of vexation: and as the blood rushed to her cheeks, she bit her lip nervously.

"When I tell you, Miss Owen, that I am acquainted with your sister Mary," observed Jocelyn, "you will perhaps condescend to listen to me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the young lady: and, the keenest interest being suddenly excited in her mind, she mechanically drew the kerchief over her shoulders, as if abandoning, at least for the moment, her wanton designs upon Loftus.

"Yes—I have seen Miss Mary Owen," he continued: "and she has told me all—everything! It was by no accident that I fell in your way at Calais, and that I became your travelling-companion to Paris. I purposely sought the opportunity to form your acquaintance, in the hope of being enabled to point out to yourself and your two sisters the lasting dishonour that will attach itself to your name if you persevere in the course where the most fatal influences have placed you. For if you regard the matter in its true light, you will perceive—you cannot fail to understand, indeed," he added emphatically, "that you are taking part in a shocking conspiracy to ruin the peace and destroy the character of a lady who never injured you. I allude to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales!"

"Heavens! that little traitress, Mary, has indeed betrayed us!" cried Agatha, now seriously alarmed, and totally losing sight of all the sensuous thoughts which a few minutes before were uppermost in her imagination. "But where is she, Mr. Loftus?—how came you to fall in with her?"

"The day after she quitted you at Woolwich, Miss Owen, did I encounter your unhappy sister in the streets of London: and you may rest assured that she is not only in a place of safety, but also in honourable companionship. I am comparatively a stranger to you," added Jocelyn, with some little significancy: "but I leave you to determine whether from the first moment of our acquaintance the day before yesterday, you have seen aught in me that would warrant a suspicion against my principles and my honour. I am young," he continued, —"perhaps too young to undertake a portion of the task which I have imposed upon myself, and which is the awakening of yourself and your sisters to a sense of the enormity of that service wherein you are embarked. But I cannot think—no—I dare not entertain so vile an opinion of human nature, as to suppose that you will designedly, deliberately, and systematically undertake the ruin of a Princess who has already suffered so much. I beseech—I implore you, Miss Owen, to weigh the matter well—to pause—to reflect—to decide on the score of justice, honour, and humanity. You have not yet compromised yourself too deeply to withdraw from this atrocious service. Pardon me for using harsh terms and strong language: but my indignation will not permit me to speak in a milder tone."

"What do you advise—what do you wish, Mr. Loftus?" asked Agatha, nervously excited and scarcely knowing what she said.

"If you would abandon the service in which you have embarked," exclaimed the young man, enthusiastically, "I would love you as a sister!"

"Ah! that is but after all a cold expression," murmured Agatha, with a tone and look of reviv-

ing tenderness. "There are perhaps terms on which I might listen to you—there is a language you might adopt that would prove irresistible——"

"Oh! do not talk to me thus, Miss Owen!" exclaimed Loftus: and as he turned his eyes reproachfully upon her, he observed that her own were swimming in a soft sensuous languor and that she was again performing the part of a syren-temptress. "I will not affect to misunderstand you, because it will only be prolonging a topic that is unfit for us both. Know, then, that I love and am betrothed to a young lady whose image is never absent from my mind,—a being endowed with every virtue, and the purity of whose soul shall never be outraged nor shocked by any word or deed on my part."

"You are the most admirable preacher I ever heard out of a pulpit, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a voice of bitter irony: but instantaneously recovering her wonted good-humour, she observed, "If you fancy that I hoped to inveigle you into a marriage with me, you are much deceived. But you spoke of loving me as a sister——"

"I meant that if you would adopt a course worthy of a high-spirited and humane woman," interrupted Loftus, "I should experience that admiration—should feel that friendship——"

"Which would doubtless be eminently flattering to me," added the young lady, in a tone of good-tempered sarcasm. "But if I give you no satisfactory assurance on that point?" she said inquiringly.

"Then I shall have no alternative but to hasten on to Italy and warn her Royal Highness of the perils and the treacheries which are closing in around her."

"You would not go to this extreme, Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed Agatha, now more terrified than ever.

"It would be made compulsory on my part by your perseverance in an unjust and dishonourable course," responded the young gentleman. "In any case I am determined to seek an interview with her Royal Highness: but I should feel well pleased not to be compelled to make any mention of the name of Owen."

"But if my two sisters and I were to pledge ourselves to observe a discreet, forbearing, and honourable conduct towards the Princess?" exclaimed Agatha, interrogatively.

"Even on those terms, you could not accept situations about her person with honour to yourselves," answered Jocelyn.

"Ah! you mean to say that you would not believe us," cried Agatha, her countenance becoming crimson. "But how can we retreat? Would you have us return to England and tell our mother that we have thrown up these high situations and renounced all these brilliant prospects? It is for you to pause and reflect, Mr. Loftus. What would become of us? Our mother's door would be closed against us: the public would fancy that something injurious to our characters had been suddenly discovered, and that our appointments as ladies-in-waiting to the Princess had been cancelled. Ruin—utter ruin—irremediable ruin would overtake us," exclaimed Agatha in a voice of despair.

"A more fatal destruction will entomb you, body and soul, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn Loftus, with deep solemnity, "if you persist in becoming the instruments of a vile conspiracy. Besides, think you that the Princess of Wales will receive you into her establishment, if forewarned against you?"

"Will you make war upon three young ladies who have not injured you, sir?" demanded Agatha, with a mixture of indignation and reproach.

"Shall I suffer war to be made by three young ladies against a Princess who not only has never injured them, but whom so many high personages in England are leagued together to ruin?"—and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he fixed his gaze earnestly upon Agatha Owen, that the seriousness of his looks might confirm the decisiveness of his language.

"Oh! if my mother were here to counsel us!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears: and the bosom that ere now glowed with sensuous transports and palpitated with the longings of desire, was convulsed with sobs.

"It is a most painful thing for any one to speak ill of a mother to the ears of her daughters," said Jocelyn: "but you must be aware, Miss Owen, that she who should have proved your best friend, has been your greatest enemy—and fortunate will it be for you, perhaps, that your mother is not now here to influence your decision."

"And if my sisters and I renounce the service in which we are engaged," said Agatha, when the first convulsion of grief had passed, "what course are we to pursue?—whither shall we go?"

"Return to England—seek your mother—and tell her the whole truth," replied Loftus. "Say that you had no alternative but to come back to her, inasmuch as I was so resolute—so sternly resolute—in declaring that if you did not, I would warn the Princess against you."

"But I must consult my sisters—I must also consult with Mrs. Ranger," observed Agatha: "and this blow has fallen so suddenly—so unexpectedly——"

"Take as much time as you think fit, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn: "and in the interval I will keep aloof from you—I will even remove my quarters to another hotel——"

"No—that would excite suspicions and create scandal here," interrupted Agatha hastily: for, notwithstanding the hostile and dictatorial attitude which Loftus had assumed, she did not wish to part from him.

"I will do nothing to increase your present annoyance," he responded. "If you can still regard me in a friendly light, after all that has just occurred, I shall cheerfully remain in your company. Indeed, I shall consider your desire for me to do so as an evidence of improved feeling on your part, and a proof that you understand and appreciate the sentiments by which my conduct is actuated. I shall now leave you, Miss Owen, for the present: and at six o'clock, I shall have the pleasure of rejoining you at the dinner-table, when I hope that no frowns or black looks will await me on the part of any one."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn rose from his seat—bowed—and quitted the apartment, leaving Agatha a prey to all the conflicting and unenviable feelings which her own disappointed sensuality and the young man's decisive conduct had so deeply aroused in her bosom.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia shortly after-

wards returned; and the intelligence which Agatha at once imparted, struck them with consternation. They were amazed—terrified—bewildered. But Mrs. Ranger, who in an emergency was prompt at laying aside the airs of an old coquette and looking matters deliberately in the face, soon recovered her presence of mind; and, consulting her watch, she said, "It is now five o'clock: we dine at six—and there is one hour before us. In that hour much may be done."

"But what can we do?" inquired the three sisters, as if in the same breath.

"If we persist in continuing our journey to join the Princess," proceeded Agatha, "Jocelyn Loftus will hasten on in advance and poison the mind of her Royal Highness, so that we shall be dismissed in ignominy when we seek her presence: and to abandon the enterprise without a struggle, would be to compel our return in equal ignominy to London."

"Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with a peculiar but unmistakable meaning upon the eldest girl, "were there no means by which you could have silenced this moralizing babbler? Ah! if I were of your age and possessed such sweet lips as yours, they should have been employed as a seal to set upon his mouth."

"He is beyond temptation," replied Agatha, the blood rushing to her cheeks and suffusing its crimson glow on her neck and shoulders, down to the very hemispheres of her bosoms.

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Ranger, now observing the luxurious exposure of Agatha's charms and comprehending the motive. "We must adopt another course. Sit down at once and pen a few lines to your mother—tell her what has happened—demand her immediate counsel—and say that we shall remain in Paris for her instructions. I will in the meantime go myself and arrange with the proprietor of the hotel for a courier to become the bearer of the letter, as we cannot wait the delays of the ordinary post."

"But Jocelyn must not know that we are despatching a courier to London," observed Agatha. "At least, it would be better that he should not——"

"Leave the affair in my hands—and lose not a moment in penning your letter," said the old Hecate of iniquity. "In half-an-hour it must be ready."

She then left the apartment.

"And so Jocelyn was proof against your witcheries?" exclaimed Emma and Julia, the instant the door closed behind Mrs. Ranger.

"His heart is of stone to *us*," was the emphatic response: "but he loves another. For my part, I have done with him—at least I think so—and yet he is so agreeable as a companion, that I should be sorry to lose him altogether from us."

"Well, my turn is now come to lay siege to him," cried Emma, her looks glowing with the animation of hope.

Agatha now began to write the letter to her mother: and in about twenty minutes it was concluded. Mrs. Ranger soon afterwards made her appearance, followed by a French courier, ready booted and spurred: the despatch was delivered to him—and he instantaneously took his departure.

At six o'clock the dinner was served up—and Jocelyn made his appearance. Mrs. Ranger and the girls were less cheerful than hitherto: but there was no alteration in the friendly tone of their manner towards himself. Indeed, a glass of champagne presently restored them all to something near their wonted liveliness;—and after dinner Jocelyn escorted them to the theatre. They returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, and sought their chambers.

The following day—(this was Wednesday, and the same on which Venetia and Sackville were married in London)—was passed in visiting the various exhibitions and public buildings that remained to be seen. Not a word was spoken relative to the all-important matter then pending: but Jocelyn remarked that Agatha did not seem so anxious as before to keep near him when they were walking, or sit next to him in the carriage which was hired for the excursion;—whereas it was now Emma who monopolised his arm and engrossed to herself all the attentions which the rules of courtesy compelled him to display.

The next day (Thursday) was passed in a similar manner,—still nothing more being said about the important topic of Jocelyn's discourse with Agatha—and Emma still constituting herself the monopolist of his attentions. The ladies all seemed to be a trifle less cheerful than at first: and it was therefore evident that the affair had made some impression upon them. But why they took so much time to arrive at a decision, Loftus could not imagine. If he were however at a loss on this point, he had no difficulty in observing that Emma was assailing his heart with a thousand little seductive wiles and insidious fascinations: but he seemed to take no notice thereof—and he assuredly gave her no encouragement.

This same Thursday brought letters from England—some for the Misses Owen; and others for Jocelyn. The former, written by the young ladies' mother, made them acquainted with the burglary which had taken place on the preceding Sunday at Richmond, and the death of the footman. The correspondence for Loftus was from his beloved Louisa, who gave him the fondest and tenderest assurances of her unalterable attachment. Before Jocelyn retired to bed that Thursday night, he read Louisa's letters over and over again, and sate up late to pen her a long epistle in reply. He stated frankly that he was still in company with Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen—that he had broken the ice with regard to the object of his visit to the continent—and that he hoped to succeed in inducing Mary's sisters to abandon their nefarious enterprise of their own accord, without compelling him to expose them to the Princess of Wales.

The following day (Friday) was passed in the same manner as the two preceding days; and Saturday was slipping by in a similar way, when Jocelyn thought it high time to express his hope to Agatha that a decision would be promptly announced to him. He accordingly found an opportunity of mentioning the subject apart to her;—and she at once assured him that on the morrow he should receive a final answer. A suspicion which he had already conceived, to the effect that the ladies were awaiting instructions from England, now became strengthened in his mind: and he frankly stated his thoughts to Agatha. But with an appearance of the most ingenuous sincerity.

she vowed that the delay was caused solely by the difficulty of coming to a decision on the point: and she added that the morrow being Sunday, they had resolved to devote the morning to an earnest deliberation on the course which was to be pursued. Jocelyn was satisfied to wait four-and-twenty hours longer;—and no more was said upon the subject this day.

Having visited a theatre in the evening, the party returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, as usual; and soon afterwards they sought their respective chambers. But when Jocelyn entered his own apartment, he found a note lying upon the toilette-table: and on examining the address, he perceived that it was in a beautiful female handwriting.

For a few moments he hesitated to break the seal, suspecting that it was a communication from one of the young ladies: but considering, on a second thought, that indiscretion and indelicacy could scarcely be carried so far, he opened the letter. His charitable conclusion was however doomed to disappointment; for the contents of the note ran as follow:—

"It is absolutely necessary that Agatha and I should have a few minutes' conversation with you alone, and as soon as possible. I am altogether of opinion that my sisters and myself should retire from the false and painful position in which the influence and intrigues of others have placed us: and for my own part I am resolved to follow the excellent advice which you so generously, disinterestedly, and kindly gave Agatha. In a word, I shall resign my appointment as lady-in-waiting to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Agatha is also inclined to adopt the same course: but Julia cannot be persuaded to fall into the same view—and Mrs. Ranger is perversely bent in opposing it. This lady watches us narrowly, in order to prevent any private conversation with you upon the subject. To-morrow, immediately after breakfast, we are to hold a consultation; and a decision will be arrived at. But it is absolutely necessary that Agatha and myself should have the benefit of further counsel from your lips before this consultation. Will you, then, have the kindness to meet us to-morrow morning at eight o'clock in the Champs Elysées?

"EMMA OWEN."

"It may be written in full honesty and sincerity," said Loftus to himself, as he contemplated the note which he had just perused: "but still I have my misgivings. Nevertheless, I will not prejudge the writer, but will keep the appointment."

CHAPTER LVI.

ANOTHER PHASE OF FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY.

CLEAR, bright, and beautiful was the Sunday morning, as Jocelyn Loftus issued from the Hotel Meurice and bent his way to the shady avenues of the Champs Elysées. This beautiful resort was not above ten minutes' walk from the hotel;—and on reaching the central avenue, Jocelyn was almost instantaneously joined by Emma Owen.

"Where is your sister?" he inquired, with a somewhat serious air: for on finding that she was alone, his misgivings of the preceding night returned with double force to his breast.

"She was so long in dressing that I feared to be late," responded Emma, with an air of frank sincerity; "and as we breakfast at nine, you know, there was not a minute to spare."

"We will at once, then, proceed to the object of our interview," said Jocelyn, offering his arm to the young lady, and leading her gently along the avenue.

We must here pause to observe that on the Sunday morning in those times as well as at the present day, large numbers of the working-classes were in the habit of proceeding early to the villages in the suburbs of Paris to pass the day in dancing, rambling in the woods, water-excursions, pic-nics, and other innocent recreations. There was scarcely a Sunday without a *ducasse*, or fair, in one of these suburban villages; and the Champs Elysées were always sure to be thronged in the morning with the pleasure-seekers repairing to the scenes of their amusement. Such was the case on the present occasion; and it was evidently impossible to pursue a serious and uninterrupted discourse in the central road of the Champs Elysées. Jocelyn was therefore compelled to conduct his fair companion into one of the less frequented paths; and indeed they soon found themselves entirely alone in a secluded avenue of trees.

Emma was elegantly dressed, and looked truly beautiful. The morning air and the inward fluttering of her feelings heightened the colour upon her cheeks and appeared to enhance the lustre of her eyes. Few men could have been stoical enough to resist the artillery of such charms: but Jocelyn loved his absent Louisa with the purest, holiest, and most fervid passion—and such a love is an armour of proof for him who experiences it.

"I have read your note with much attention, Miss Owen, and with unfeigned pleasure," he began, determined to take her at her word precisely as she had expressed herself in her communication. "You have resolved to resign your appointment—your eldest sister is prepared, you tell me, to adopt a similar course—but Miss Julia cannot so easily abandon a post which she doubtless considers to be invested with brilliancy and honour. Mrs. Ranger is obstinately opposed to the course I have pointed out: and she perhaps exercises considerable influence over Miss Julia's mind. Is this the actual position of the affair?"

"It is," replied Emma: then, gazing up fondly in Jocelyn's face, she said in a low and tremulous tone, "It was a fatal day, Mr. Loftus, when you first resolved upon your present enterprise, however generous and even chivalric may have been your motive."

"What do you mean, Miss Owen?" he demanded, surveying her in astonishment.

"I mean, Mr. Loftus—and I implore you to hear me with attention," she cried, grasping his arm firmly with her elegantly-gloved hand, as if she were fearful that he would escape her,—"I mean that you have deprived me of my peace of mind—of all my hopes of happiness in this world! You have extirpated one idea from my soul—but you have implanted another there, which is indelible. You have destroyed the dream of grandeur which I had pictured to myself in connexion with my appointment to the little Court of her Royal Highness: and you have left in the place of that golden vision the image of yourself. Oh! start not—attempt not to withdraw your arm—you *must* and you *shall* hear me!" she exclaimed, with a wild

energy. "For I am not the mistress of my own feelings—I cannot control my own actions. I have conceived for you a passion that is in itself a frenzy——"

"Miss Owen, I dare hear no more!" said Jocelyn, resolutely and almost sternly. "Let it suffice for you to learn and for me to declare that I love another——"

"Ah! wretch that I am!" she cried, with a faint shriek: "I cannot endure to live! By all that is sacred I swear——"

"Take no rash vow—calm yourself—tranquillise your feelings!" exclaimed Jocelyn, cruelly embarrassed by this scene, and deeply, deeply regretting he had kept the appointment: but more than half suspecting that her frenzied manner was only feigned, he said, "Remember how indiscreet——how unlady-like—how unmaidenly it is on your part, thus to address a young man who is almost a stranger to you."

"A stranger!" cried Emma hysterically, as she clung with force to his arm. "No—no: I am as well acquainted with you as if I had known you all my life. Your's are qualities so resplendent that they take one by surprise, and seize as it were upon the very heart. You must not blame me for what I have done—for what I am doing. Why did you throw yourself in my way?—why did you seek our companionship in this journey? It was not I who sought you in the first instance. Had you been a stranger passing me in the street, and if I had accosted you, you would have been justified in spurning me from your presence: but it was far different. You introduced yourself, as it were, to me—you shone upon me in all the glory of your beautiful person and your brilliant mind—and you snatched away my heart. It was not taken slowly and insidiously—it was ravished all in a moment. And can I help this love—this immeasurable love—with which you have inspired me?—is it my fault that I have succumbed to the magic of that voice and those looks the influence of which has been shed upon me? And you—cruel that you are—you reproach me for telling you that state of mind into which you yourself have plunged me!"

Then, apparently exhausted by this torrent of words which she had poured out with passionate vehemence, Emma Owen sank upon a bench and gave way to a flood of equally violent weeping.

Jocelyn threw a rapid glance around; and it was some relief to his immense perplexity to be assured that no observer was nigh. Indeed, he was most cruelly bewildered. The ardour of the young lady's language—her impassioned manner—her wild looks—and then her apparently deep anguish, all staggered him. Himself too little versed in the treacheries and hypocrisies, the feints and the artifices, of which the human mind is capable, he could not believe that this scene was all duplicity—all a studied tragedy—from the beginning up to the present stage. And yet he could not bring himself to fancy it entirely genuine and real. Thus, tormented by uncertainty—fearful of proving harsh on the one hand, and recoiling from the idea of being made a dupe on the other—he dared not withhold commiseration, and he dared not proffer it.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a voice that was serious without being severe, and in a manner that was reserved without being harsh, "I must beg and implore that you permit me at once to escort you back to the hotel. There is a duty which you owe to yourself—there is a duty which you owe to me as a fellow-creature. That is, to control your feelings, to whatever extent they may be excited——"

"Oh! this is maddening—maddening!" exclaimed Emma, clasping her hands as if in despair. "How can you preach patience, calmness, and duty to one who is goaded to frenzy? You say that you love another. Well—I seek not to interfere with the happiness of that being whom you have blessed with this enviable love. You have a whole life to devote to her: can you, then, refuse me one single day—one single hour of love—since you have stolen away my heart? Ah! it is a dreadful confession to make—and I feel the tingling of shame from the crown of my head to my very feet: but this confession must be made all the same! And it is that I love you with a madness of passion—with a frenzy that will prove my death: and that madness—that frenzy must be appeased. Surely no woman ever loved so wildly, so intensely, and so enthusiastically before! My doom, then, is in your hands: give me one day—one single day—of that blessed love of thine—and I shall sustain myself on the memory thereof for the rest of my life! Nay—I shall even be happy—contented—rejoiced: and I shall treasure up the recollection of that one day's consummated bliss, as the only gem that my soul covets. But refuse me, Jocelyn—refuse me," she said, the exaltation of her voice and manner suddenly sinking into lowness and gloom,—"refuse me, I say—and the waters of the Seine are deep——"

"Heavens! what madness is this?" cried Loftus, his perplexity now rising into the cruellest alarm. "I have listened to you too long, Miss Owen—and you have said too much."

"Farewell, then—farewell for ever!" she suddenly exclaimed: and springing from the seat, she sped along the avenue with the fleetness of the hunted deer, towards the bank of the river Seine which flowed hard by.

"Good God! she is serious—it is no artifice!" thought Jocelyn: and, wild with terror, he bounded after her, overtaking her near the end of the avenue.

She sank exhausted in his arms: and as he bore her to one of the numerous benches scattered about, he saw that her eyes were closing as if she were going to faint, although the deep hues of overwrought excitement remained upon her cheeks.

Placing himself upon the seat, which was a mere common bench without any back to lean against, he was compelled to support her in his arms: and once more did he look up and down the avenue, in the fear of being observed. But no person was approaching, nor even visible from that spot: and, somewhat relieved by this circumstance, he again bent his looks upon the countenance of the young lady.

"Ah! it were sweet to die thus," she murmured softly, as she opened her eyes and gazed up into his countenance with ineffable tenderness. "But wherefore did you pursue me—why did you hold me back, when in another minute there would have been an end to the woes, the anguish, and the despair which you have implanted in my bosom?"

"Let us not renew the conversation now, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, gently raising her recumbent form. "You have afflicted me sadly—you

have terrified me profoundly—and I must insist that we return at once to the hotel."

"You will subject me, then, to the matchless humiliation of having besought an hour of your love, and experiencing a refusal?" murmured Emma, bending down her hazel eyes, upon the lashes of which the tear-drops trembled—while the blush of shame was now upon her cheeks, and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"I scarcely think you comprehend the purport of your own words, Miss Owen," said Loftus, emphatically: "and I hope to God that you do not. Very, very painful would it be for me to imagine——"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in another paroxysm of frenzied exaltation: "you must imagine the truth—and of that truth I am not ashamed. For you have filled my heart with a passion which is consuming me: and all my happiness—my very life indeed—is staked upon the hope of appeasing it. Revile—scorn—loath—abhor me as you will,—denounce me as unmaidenly—proscribe me as a disgrace to my sex,—but still you cannot alter the condition of my heart. And surely when a fond, a loving, and a devoted woman offers to abandon herself to you, not only as a proof of that illimitable worship—that frenzied adoration,—but also that she herself may have the recollection of that hour of love and bliss to compensate her for the loss of thee thereafter and enable her to sustain the weight of the future years of her existence,—surely, I say, you will not spurn her altogether!"

Thus speaking, Emma fixed her fond and earnest regards in profound entreaty upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, shocked at the dreadful depravity which was enveloped in such softly insidious language, could not prevent his looks from betraying the disgust that filled his soul.

"Take my arm, madam," he said, in a stern and imperious tone, as he rose from the bench. "It is time we should hasten homeward."

"No—I will not move until I have your response," exclaimed Emma, passionately.

"Then hear it, whatever be the consequences," rejoined Loftus. "Your wiles—your arts—your fascinations are wasted upon me: I would sooner perish than prove unfaithful to her who possesses my love. Come, Miss Owen—I insist upon our immediate departure hence."

Humiliated—baffled—disappointed—and almost crushed with the overpowering sense of shame, Emma saw that her seductive arts were indeed thrown away upon this well-principled young man; and mechanically taking his arm, she suffered him to lead her from the secluded avenue where the extraordinary scene just recorded had taken place.

Not a word was now spoken between them: nor did Emma dare even to risk a furtive glance at his countenance, for fear he should observe that she thus regarded him. But there was in the depths of her soul the intuitive conviction that his looks were full of the expression of outraged feeling: and depraved as she was in heart, she nevertheless deplored her folly in risking so consummate a humiliation. She was also racked by the torture of unappeasable desires: for although her conduct towards Jocelyn had commenced in artifice and duplicity, it had nevertheless acquired a certain amount of sincerity from the inspiration of her licentious passions. Thus the ardour of her language was not altogether feigned: but it was created by the heart's own incendiarism of feelings, and not by the purer flame of love.

In silence did they regain the hotel; and the moment they entered the passage leading to the sitting-room, Jocelyn stopped short.

"Miss Owen," he said, "I shall not betray to a living soul the particulars of the interview which has taken place between us. I will not add to your humiliation by publishing your shame. If your absence has been observed, I leave you to give what explanations you choose. But I must decline the honour of henceforth joining your party at table or elsewhere. If your sisters and yourself have any communication to make relative to the important subject which I need only thus allude to, it can be done in writing. But if I hear nothing from you in the course of this day, I shall to-morrow morning continue my journey—but *alone*—towards Italy: and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales will be duly prepared to receive the spies whom her unprincipled husband has appointed to attend upon her."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn Loftus bowed coldly and turned away: and Emma, who had listened with flushing cheeks, downcast eyes, and trembling form, hastened up to her own chamber to give vent to her agitated feelings in a flood of tears.

On thus leaving the young lady, Jocelyn issued from the passage and passed into the court-yard of the hotel, for the purpose of seeking the coffee-room where he intended to take his breakfast. But he was accosted by an elderly, sour-looking Frenchman, plainly though by no means shabbily dressed, and the first glance of whose eyes seemed intended to pierce Loftus through and through.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he began, politely raising his hat; "but I wish to have a word or two with you on business of importance."

"We will inquire for a private room," said Jocelyn, not much liking the man's appearance or mode of address, and having a vague and undefined suspicion of some impending treachery.

"It is not worth while, sir," was the response. "In fact, I may as well inform you at once that I am a police-agent—and those persons," he added glancing over his shoulder towards two individuals, also in plain clothes, who were lounging under the gate-way, "are my comrades. You will have the goodness, sir, to accompany me to the Prefecture of Police."

"For what purpose?—and upon what charge?" demanded Loftus, indignantly.

"Merely to give the Prefect some little explanations, sir," replied the police-agent. "I dare say it will be all right: but you *must* come away at once."

"Allow me to visit my chamber for a moment," said Loftus, "in order to fetch some papers and documents that I may require, to prove my respectability, if that be the point on which the Prefect demands information."

"Your papers are already in my possession, sir," returned the police-agent, drily.

"What! you have dared violate the privacy of my writing-desk?" exclaimed Jocelyn, more indignantly than at first.

"I had my authority, sir," was the cold and laconic rejoinder.

Jocelyn paused for a few moments: but well aware that the French police possessed extraordinary powers, and reflecting how useless it would be to defy them, he said, "I will accompany you."

The agent again raised his hat politely, and followed Loftus from the court-yard of the hotel. On emerging into the street, they entered a hackney-coach that was ready waiting at a little distance; and the officer made a sign to his two men that they need not follow into the vehicle, as they were about to do.

The hackney-coach rolled away along the Rue St. Honoré; and during its progress to the head-quarters of the police, Jocelyn endeavoured to glean from his companion a more special idea of the cause of the present proceeding. But the agent was so guarded in his replies that the young gentleman was left as much in the dark as he was before he put his queries—though, perhaps, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth.

In twenty-minutes the hackney-coach turned into the dark and gloomy gateway of the Prefecture; and Jocelyn was immediately conducted by the police-agent into the presence of an old gentleman, who was seated at a desk in a handsomely-furnished apartment. This functionary was the Prefect of Police.

"Be seated," he said in a courteous tone: and Jocelyn, as he took a chair, began to imagine that there was no treachery in contemplation after all.

Meantime the police-agent had quitted the apartment: but returning in a few moments, he handed the Prefect a document which Jocelyn instantaneously recognised as his own passport, and which he had delivered to the landlord of the hotel, according to custom, on his arrival in Paris.

"You know this paper?" said the Prefect, displaying it before Jocelyn's eyes.

"I do. It is my passport," he replied.

"But it is made out in a false name, sir," remarked the Prefect. "You do not deny this allegation?"

"I do not deny it," rejoined the young gentleman: "but I will at once, and, I am sure, in the most satisfactory manner explain to your Excellency the reasons——"

"I ask no explanations, sir," interrupted the Prefect, more curtly and severely than before. "With your motives I have nothing to do: the fact, which you deny not, is sufficient for me. It is my painful duty to detain you in custody for the present. You will have the goodness to accompany the officer——"

"But, your Excellency, this outrage——"

"Silence, sir!" ejaculated the Prefect, now speaking with unmitigated sternness.

"No, I will not remain silent!" exclaimed Loftus, his countenance glowing with indignation. "As a British subject, I shall demand the protection of my country's Ambassador——"

But the Prefect cut short the young gentleman's words by abruptly quitting the apartment: and the police-agent, tapping him upon the shoulder, said, "Have the goodness to follow me, sir."

Loftus, perceiving that it was useless to remonstrate with a subordinate who was obeying the commands of a superior, accompanied him from the room, and was conducted along a dark passage to a small ill-furnished chamber, the windows of which were defended with massive iron bars.

The door was then closed upon him: and as the grating sound of the key turning in the lock, and of the huge bolts shooting into their sockets, met his ears, he thought of his absent and well-beloved Louisa—and his heart sank within him!

CHAPTER LVII.

THE REUNION OF THE PARTY OF SIX.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the marriage of Horace Sackville and Venetia Trelawney; and in the evening of the 10th of October—(for, after Byron's example, we like to be particular in dates)—all was bustle and activity at the house of Colonel Malpas in Great Marlborough Street.

The dining-room was brilliantly lighted: the table was laid for six persons;—the side-board exhibited a splendid dessert in crystal dishes—and the culinary process below-stairs gave promise of a luxurious banquet.

At about a quarter to six o'clock Colonel Malpas, dressed in full evening costume, descended from his chamber and cast an approving eye over the arrangements in the dining-room. Everything was to his perfect satisfaction: and his butler received due acknowledgments for the taste displayed in the preliminary details of the entertainment.

"It does you infinite credit, Plumpstead," said the Colonel: "very great credit indeed. By the bye, how much am I indebted to you, my good fellow?"

"Only two years and a half's wages, at forty guineas a-year, sir," was the response: but though Mr. Plumpstead courteously introduced the word *only*, it must by no means be fancied that he was well pleased at the existence of these long arrears.

"Ah! that's a hundred guineas, Plumpstead," said the Colonel. "Well—I shall settle with you to-morrow—you may rely upon it."

"I hope you will not forget it, sir," replied the butler, with a low bow: then, as his master left the room, he muttered to himself, "The cheating scoundrel! I don't believe I shall ever see the colour of my money. I can take my oath something queer's going to happen—for I am certain that fellow was a sheriff's-officer who called this morning to ask if the Colonel was in town. And by the bye, I forgot to tell master of it: but no matter. To-morrow will be time enough."

Thus mused Mr. Plumpstead, the butler,—while the Colonel ascended the well-lighted staircase to the drawing-room. There he surveyed himself from head to foot in one of the handsome mirrors: and as he caressed his moustache, he complacently observed, "Well, I certainly am good-looking enough to win the favours of even such a transcendent beauty as Venetia Trelawney."

But still the Colonel was not altogether easy in his mind. To speak more plainly still, he was restless, nervous, and agitated. It was true that he had succeeded in persuading his wife to pay a visit for the occasion to her plebeian relatives in the City—for be it remembered that he had married the daughter of a retired butcher:—and he had also managed to get the money to provide the sumptuous banquet about to take place. But the satisfaction arising from these achievements was more than counterbalanced by the desperate hazards and risks he was about to run, and into which his desperate circumstances had impelled him. In fact, he was knave enough to concoct any villany; but he was somewhat deficient in the courage necessary to carry it out. Therefore, the nearer the hour approached for executing the scheme on which he was bent, the more nervous did he become.

In addition to this, Emmerson had compelled him to sign a note of hand, payable on demand, for the amount of the forged bills. This note was given on the morning after the scene with Lady Curzon at Mrs. Gale's: thus a fortnight had elapsed—and the note was still unpaid. Two or three days previous to the evening of which we are now writing, Malpas received an urgent and indeed threatening letter from Mr. Emmerson: but he had written to put the bill-broker off with a solemn assurance to liquidate the whole sum in the course of the week. His only hope of paying the amount existed in the result of the scheme which he had now in hand, and in furtherance of which the banquet was to be given;—and if this scheme should fail, utter ruin would stare him in the face, with the concomitant alternatives of flight to the continent or a debtor's gaol.

Such was the position wherein Colonel Malpas was placed: and the reader requires not to be assured that it was far from an enviable one. Indeed, that self-sufficient survey of his person in the mirror and that complacent caressing of the moustache, were only the sickly attempt of an agitated mind to persuade itself that it was not so restless as it really was, in the same way that a guilty person who trembles at every knock at the door, endeavours to tranquillise his fears by constantly saying, "After all, it is impossible I can be found out." Thus do men, in difficult and danger-

ous circumstances, invariably strive to reason themselves out of their most settled convictions, and persuade themselves that the feelings which torture them are really not felt at all!

But to return to the thread of our story.

Precisely at six o'clock, a carriage dashed up to the Colonel's house—and in a few moments the footman flung open the drawing-room door, announcing in a loud voice, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon!"

The Colonel hastened forward to receive him: and as they shook hands, the baronet said, with a gay laugh, "Well, upon my word, Malpas, I was never more surprised in all my life than when I received your note of invitation to this banquet."

"Is there anything so very remarkable in my having company?" observed the Colonel, affecting a happy and good-humoured smile. "Methinks," he continued, with his wonted drawing-room drawl, "this is not the first time I shall have had the pleasure of entertaining you, Huntingdon: and I am sure I hope it will not be the last."

"And so do I," exclaimed the baronet, flinging himself upon a seat. "But your note enjoined me to lay aside any other engagement I might have formed, inasmuch as this banquet was in pursuance of the agreement entered into a month ago at Leveson House. What, then, could I imagine, but that after all you have been the successful candidate for the favours of the lovely Venetia?"

"Well, you shall see presently," observed Malpas, assuming a pleasant look of mingled significancy and triumph. "All in good time, you know: the banquet first—and business afterwards."

"But how on earth could Sackville have married her?" exclaimed the baronet, evidently bewildered by the various thoughts that were agitating conflictingly in his mind. "Of course he did not know that she had already been won by you: and, if he comes to-night, I should think the scene will be rather a painful, or at all events an extraordinary one. He will have to be told to his face that he married a woman who, with all her enchanting beauty, was no better than she should be——"

At this moment the door was again thrown open—and the Earl of Curzon was announced.

"My dear Malpas," he exclaimed, "is it a fact?—or is it a hoax? It is assuredly no delusion that you purpose to give us a banquet—for the dining-room door stood open as I passed through the hall; and to clear up the misgivings which had haunted me ever since I received your note a few days back, I peeped in and saw covers laid for six. Pardon this impertinence on my part—but I really could not help thus gratifying my curiosity and appeasing my suspense."

"Well, I have been as much astonished as yourself, Curzon," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, while the Colonel endeavoured to look good-humouredly knowing and complacently mysterious. "But I was observing to Malpas just as you came in, what an ass Sackville has either made of himself or else will be made to appear to-night——"

"I don't think he will come," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "In fact, he can not: he would never dare show his face amongst us. He will be too much ashamed of himself, and will never stand all the bantering he must expect for being so egregiously duped. For my part, I think Venetia is a deuced deal worse than he must even suspect after receiving Malpas's note——But, by the bye did you send him one?" asked the nobleman, turning towards the Colonel.

"To be sure I did," was the response. "Was I not bound to do so in accordance with the agreement made at Leveson House?"

"As a matter of course," observed Huntingdon. "But what do you mean, Curzon," he inquired, evidently struck by something the nobleman had said, "when you state that Venetia is worse than her husband can even suspect her to be after receiving Malpas's note of invitation?"

"I mean," replied the Earl, "that I am very much mistaken if——"

But he stopped short as the door was again thrown open and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance.

Malpas hastened to welcome the old debauchee, who, after shaking hands with Curzon and Sir Douglas, drew the Colonel aside, saying, "I'm really afraid this will turn out an unpleasant business."

"How do you mean?" inquired Malpas, a cold terror seizing upon him.

"Because it must produce a quarrel between you and Sackville."

"No such thing. If he were fool enough to be gulled into a marriage with a woman who had previously surrendered herself to me——"

"There is some force in your argument," interrupted Lord Leveson: "but let us look well at the matter so as to anticipate, if possible, any dispute with Sackville, which might give publicity to the thing——"

"Oh! for his own sake, he will not let the world know what a fool he has been," said the Colonel, evidently anxious to escape from the colloquy into which the Marquis was drawing him.

"At all events let us talk it over, Malpas," persisted the nobleman: and leading him still further towards the extremity of the spacious drawing-room, he proceeded to argue upon the necessity of caution—but evidently with the more interested object of extracting from the Colonel all the particulars relative to his presumed triumph over Venetia.

Meanwhile Sir Douglas Huntingdon had drawn the Earl of Curzon aside to the other extremity of the drawing-room: and looking him earnestly in the face, he said, "What was the observation you were about to make when Leveson arrived?"

"Well, I hardly know whether I ought to give utterance to my suspicions," returned the Earl, in a musing tone: "but in confidence between you and me, I have every reason to believe that Venetia abandoned herself to the Marquis of Leveson and the Prince of Wales——"

"And I have entertained precisely the same suspicions," interrupted the baronet.

"The devil you have!" said the Earl in surprise. "But how on earth——"

"I know what you are going to say," remarked the baronet, with a smile of peculiar meaning: "and may I not also inquire how on earth *you* came to glean *your* information on those points? Come—let us be candid with each other."

"Willingly," said the Earl. "In plain terms, then, I bribed Tash and his man Robin to watch Venetia——"

"So did I," responded the baronet.

"Well! this is excellent!" remarked Curzon. "And they informed you that Venetia went to Leveson House and Carlton Palace on the same night?"

"Precisely so," returned the baronet. "But they also gave me a version of Malpas's interview with Venetia in Lady Wenlock's grounds at Kew, which does not very well tally with his boasted triumph over her."

"And they gave me a similarly puzzling account of that interview," rejoined Curzon. "In fact, it is this that has so much perplexed me. I do not know what to think. Either Tash or Malpas must lie most tremendously."

"The affair is curiously involved," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon; "and its details are intricate to a degree. Malpas never would be fool and scoundrel enough——'

"I have no very exalted opinion of him," said the Earl: "and you must remember there are six thousand guineas at stake. Leveson is treasurer: and we will not allow him to part with the money unless Malpas can give us the most positive and undeniable proofs that he really succeeded in being the first to win the favours of Venetia. What induces me to fancy that he might have done so, is that Venetia evidently abandoned herself to Leveson and the Prince—on the same evening too: and therefore she is thoroughly depraved."

"But why should she have rejected you and me?" asked the baronet. "At all events, if money be her object, you could have given her as much as Malpas: and if good looks be concerned, I may add, without flattery, that you ought to have stood a better chance than he."

At this moment the door was thrown open; and the domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Malpas, instantaneously quitting Lord Leveson, advanced to meet the Prince, who shook hands with him as cordially as ever, despite the angry declaration which he had made to Venetia, the night of her visit to Carlton Palace, to the effect that the Colonel was a sneaking scoundrel and would do well never to show himself in his royal presence again. Thus was it, however, that the royal presence was now vouchsafed at the Colonel's dwelling, notwithstanding the menace alluded to.

After exchanging a few words with Malpas on ordinary topics, and without the slightest mention of Venetia's name, the Prince Regent suddenly turned towards Leveson, saying, "By the bye, my dear Marquis, I have a few words to whisper in your ear,—on a political matter: and I hope Malpas will excuse my rudeness in taking you aside."

"Your Royal Highness is the master here as elsewhere," said the Colonel: and, caressing his moustache, he proceeded to join the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

The Prince took Leveson's arm and lounged with him towards the end of the room: then, in a low tone, he said, "What the devil is the meaning of all this?"

"I cannot understand it," responded the Marquis. "It seems tolerably clear that Malpas has achieved a triumph: and I believe it, because when Venetia came to my house she told me that the Colonel had made her acquainted with all the particulars of the love-campaign."

"She told me precisely the same thing," observed the Prince: "but she spoke of Malpas at the time in terms of contempt and disgust."

"That may have been an artifice," said Lord Leveson. "Malpas assures me he shall produce the most undeniable evidence of his success: but what the evidence is he would not explain at present. Venetia must be as deceptive and designing as she is beautiful."

"I really begin to think so," observed the Prince. "It was my intention to cut Malpas for ever: but when I received his note of invitation to this banquet, and understood the meaning it implied, I was positively astounded. I therefore resolved to suspend my opinion altogether until the events of this evening should have transpired. But I am seriously afraid that Sackville has made a great fool of himself, and is inveigled into a match with an unprincipled adventuress—most probably head and ears in debt, and only anxious to get a husband in order to throw the burthen of her liabilities upon his shoulders and thus save herself from prison."

"It looks uncommonly like it," observed the Marquis.

"By the bye, any news of the gossamer lady?" asked the Prince with a smile.

"None, sir," responded the nobleman, his looks becoming clouded all in a moment: but instantaneously recovering his composure, he said, "Does your Royal Highness know whether Mr. and Mrs. Sackville have returned to town?"

"I do not," answered the Prince. "But perhaps Malpas can tell us:"—then advancing towards the centre of the room, he said, "Colonel, do you know whether the Sackvilles have returned from Brighton?"

"They came back last night, sir," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon; "and proceeded to Acacia Cottage."

"You had that information from our friend Tash," whispered the baronet hurriedly. "He sent Robin to me late last night with the same intelligence."

"Do you think Sackville will join our party?" inquired the Prince.

"I have received no answer to my invitation," said the Colonel.

"For my part, I do not think he will make his appearance," observed the Earl of Curzon.

"Nor I," added Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "He must be heartily ashamed of himself, no doubt."

"And would not like to face us—eh?" said the Marquis of Leveson.

"He fears, perhaps, a terrible bantering," observed the Prince Regent.

"It is now half-past six," said the Colonel, consulting his watch: "and that is the time named in the note of invitation. Shall I order dinner to be served up?"

But ere the Prince, to whom the question was put, had time to answer, the door was again thrown open—and the servant announced Mr. Horace Sackville.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE BANQUET.

VENETIA'S husband advanced into the room with the easy assurance and calm self-possession of

good breeding, and as if there were nothing peculiar either in his own position or in the circumstances of the present occasion. Having paid his respects to Colonel Malpas, who could very well have dispensed with his company, Horace turned towards the Prince: and his Royal Highness shook him with all his wonted cordiality by the hand. The Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were equally warm in their greetings: whereas the Earl of Curzon was not only somewhat cold and distant, but likewise suffered a partial sneer to curl his lips as he spoke. Sackville did not however seem to notice this manifestation of ill-feeling: but, turning again towards the others, he proceeded to discourse, without constraint or embarrassment, upon the principal topics of the day.

In a few minutes the domestic announced that dinner was served; and the party repaired to the banquetting-room.

The repast was of the most succulent description, fully equalling that of which the same company had partaken at Lord Leveson's. The wines were of the first quality; and the dessert was not less commendable to the tastes of the convivialists. During the banquet not a word was spoken in reference to the object of the meeting—and not an allusion made to it. But the discourse was sustained, as if by common consent, on a variety of other subjects. Nevertheless, everybody *did* in his heart feel that unless these efforts were made to support the conversation uninterruptedly, the damp of constraint would speedily fall upon their spirits. As for Colonel Malpas, he drank large quantities of wine in order to keep up an artificial gaiety: but the nearer the moment arrived for the grand act in the drama, the more nervous and apprehensive did he in reality become.

At length the cloth was drawn—the dessert was placed upon the table—and the domestics retired.

It was now about eight o'clock in the evening: and Mr. Plumpstead, the butler, opening the front door, looked up and down Great Marlborough Street, by the light of the lamps. In a few minutes three persons descended from a private carriage at a little distance; and, having directed that the vehicle should wait for their return, they hurried to the door at which the butler was standing.

These three persons were Venetia, Captain Tash, and his man Robin.

The lady was elegantly dressed and looked enchantingly beautiful, as if she had even derived a more brilliant loveliness from matrimony. Captain Tash was in full evening costume, with dress coat, white waistcoat and cravat, and kid gloves: his aspect was uncommonly fierce, as usual—but blended therewith, was an air of supreme importance. As for Robin, he was decently attired: but the purple robes of Napoleon could not have imparted dignity to his shambling gait and sneaking looks.

"Hush!" said the butler, putting his finger to his lips in a knowing manner, the instant Venetia and her two companions ascended the steps: "it is all right. Mr. Sackville has told me of your coming—and he's a real gentleman. *He* wouldn't owe two years and a half's wages to a poor butler, I'll be bound."

Having somewhat relieved his feelings by this indirect cut at his master, Mr. Plumpstead admitted Venetia, Captain Tash, and Robin into the house, gently closing the front-door.

"Now, ma'am, what can I do for you next?" he inquired of Venetia. "Mr. Sackville has done what's right towards me——"

"He has proposed to take you into his service?" said Venetia.

"He has, ma'am: and therefore I already regard you as my missus."

"Can you manage to leave the dining-room door a little ajar," inquired Venetia, "so that I may overhear what takes place within?"

"Certainly, ma'am," responded Plumpstead. "Be so good as to remain here quite quiet: there's no fear of any one coming out of the dining-room—and if any of the other servants should see you in the hall, they won't say a word. I've given them a hint upon the subject."

Thus speaking, Plumpstead cast a glance upon the hall-table in search of some object which should furnish a pretext for entering the dining-room; and taking up a crystal jug, filled with water, he threw his napkin half round it in the true butler-fashion, and carried it in. As he placed it upon the table, Colonel Malpas said, "You need not come in any more until I ring."

"Very good, sir," replied Plumpstead: and he paused for a few instants to open a large screen and draw it round the door, apparently to keep out the draught, but in reality to hide the door itself.

Then, issuing from the room, he caused the door to sound as if it were being shut—whereas he left it ajar. Captain Tash, Venetia, and Robin were thus enabled to overhear in the hall whatever took place in the dining-room.

The critical moment had now arrived for Colonel Malpas to carry out the daring scheme which he had concocted: and when it became evident that he was about to rise and speak, the looks of his guests were fixed upon him with an expression of intense interest.

Tossing off a bumper of Port, he rose and said, "May it please your Royal Highness, and you, my lords and gentlemen, it would ill become me to act as chairman or president at a meeting in which I am about to perform a somewhat prominent part. I therefore suggest that our esteemed treasurer the Marquis of Leveson, shall preside over our proceedings."

"A very excellent suggestion," observed the Prince Regent. "Of course you all agree. Good! Come, take the chair, Leveson."

Colonel Malpas accordingly resigned his seat at the head of the table to the Marquis, and took the one which this nobleman had hitherto occupied next to the Prince Regent.

"Now," said Lord Leveson, as he drew forth his pocket-book and counted down six Bank-notes, each for a thousand pounds,—afterwards placing a purse full of gold upon them,—"here are the six thousand guineas which I have held as treasurer, and which I am prepared to pay into the hands of the fortunate individual who shall prove his right and title to the same, according to the terms of our compact. But I must observe, as your chairman, that I hope our proceedings will be conducted with the utmost good-humour, and that each and all will preserve a calm temper, no matter what may transpire."

"A bumper to ratify that most judicious sentiment!" exclaimed the dissipated Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"And now," resumed the Marquis of Leveson, when the glasses had been filled and emptied, "it becomes my painful duty to ask our young and esteemed friend Mr. Sackville, whether, as the husband of the lady whose name will have to be mentioned presently, and whose image is doubtless in all our minds, he has any remark to make ere our proceedings continue any farther?"

"For the moment I have only a suggestion to offer," replied Horace, speaking in a firm tone: "which is, that your lordship shall take the names in the order they issued from the ballot, and each shall answer *yea* or *nay*, as explanatory of the result of his suit in respect to the lady alluded to."

"Be it so," said the Marquis of Leveson: "and I think the suggestion is a good one. According to the ballot, the names stood in the following order:—

Monday—The Earl of Curzon.
Tuesday—Sir Douglas Huntingdon.
Wednesday—Colonel Malpas.
Thursday—The Prince Regent.
Friday—The Marquis of Leveson.
Saturday—Mr. Sackville.

According, then, to this category, I call upon the Earl of Curzon to speak first."

"I am bound to admit, frankly and candidly," replied this nobleman, "that I experienced no success in the matter alluded to."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson.

"With equal frankness and candour, I declare that I was as unsuccessful as Lord Curzon," answered the baronet.

"Colonel Malpas!" exclaimed the Marquis.

"My lord," said that individual, rising from his chair, and speaking in a voice which borrowed its calmness from desperation; "I am bound, however painful the announcement may be to any friend present,—and seeing the peculiar nature of the circumstances which were initiated in an after-dinner frolic, I hope there will be no less of friendship on this account,—I am bound, I say, to declare that the result of my campaign made me for the time being the happiest of men."

Having thus spoken, the Colonel resumed his chair and immediately tossed off a bumper of wine.

"Let the names be called to the end of the list," said Horace Sackville, whose face was white as a sheet, but whose voice was nevertheless marked by a firm decision.

"Be it so," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson. "The Prince Regent!"

"On my honour, as a man and a gentleman—setting aside my rank for the present," returned his Royal Highness, "I cannot boast of having been blest with the favours of the lady alluded to."

The Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon exchanged rapid looks, expressive of surprise at this announcement, the truth of which they could not doubt: they therefore both fell back upon the belief that Captain Tash must have deceived them in his representation of Venetia's visit to Carlton House.

"My own name stands next upon the list," said the Marquis of Leveson, "and my explanation is precisely the same as that already given by his Royal Highness:"—then, after a moment's pause, he observed with a half-smile, "Mr. Sackville, am I to call upon you?"

"Most assuredly," returned Horace, his cheeks now slightly flushing, and his voice remaining imperturbably calm. "I wooed Venetia—and I won her. She is my wife. But if Colonel Malpas can prove that previously to our wedding-day, he succeeded in obtaining the favours of her whom I have thus made my wife, I cannot possibly, under the very peculiar circumstances of the case, be offended with him. Seeing, however, that so far as I am concerned, a love-campaign which commenced as an after-dinner frolic, has terminated in the most serious and solemn manner for myself—namely, in marriage,—I hope that Colonel Malpas will not stand forward to blast the reputation of my wife without having irrefragable evidence to produce in support of his assertion: and I likewise hope that you, whom I now address, will not consider that the present scene is nothing more than another act in that same after-dinner farce, but that you will treat the matter with all the solemnity and seriousness that should characterise a jury of honourable men."

There was a tone of deep feeling in this speech which produced a visible effect upon all present: and the Earl of Curzon, now that his heart was somewhat warmed by the generous wine, was the very first to exclaim, "By heaven, Sackville, you shall have fair play!" This sentiment was echoed by the Prince Regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon: while Malpas, whose heart was sinking within his breast, tossed off two or three glasses of wine in rapid succession.

But still sustained to a considerable degree by the courage which often arises from the desperation of a neck-or-nothing position, he rose from his seat amidst a profound silence, and spoke as follows:—

"Far be it from me to make a declaration of so serious and solemn a nature as that which I have put forth, without being enabled to substantiate it. Hitherto we have all of us been apt to deal lightly enough with the reputation of women; and we should doubtless have continued to do so in the present instance, were it not that the lady in question has recently married one of our party, and that the husband himself is present. I will make no lengthy comment upon what I may term the imprudence, if not the actual indelicacy, of Mr. Sackville appearing amongst us under existing circumstances: but I cannot help adding that whatever statements he may now hear to shock his feelings, he himself to some extent courts the feelings they are thus calculated to excite."

He paused for a few instants: and those who glanced furtively at Horace Sackville, saw that he was evidently labouring under the influence of emotions which he had some little trouble to restrain. His cheeks had a hectic flush, like that of fever, upon them—his eyes were fixed, but unnaturally bright—and his lips were firmly compressed. His whole appearance indicated the inevitable bursting forth of a terrific storm: it was the volcano as yet sleeping, but surrounded by the fever-heat that preludes an explosion.

"I will now proceed to my proofs," resumed Malpas, who alone mistook Sackville's ominous looks and guarded silence for the evidences of a crushed and broken spirit. "You are aware that my day for the love-campaign was a Wednesday.

On the previous day I chanced to call upon Lady Wenlock at Kew; and in the course of conversation her ladyship mentioned that the most celebrated beauty of the day, Miss Venetia Trelawney (as her name then was, previously to her marriage), was to be at the horticultural fête announced by her ladyship for the ensuing evening. Having already received an invitation, I resolved to be there. On the Wednesday morning I met Mr. Sackville by accident, and told him I should be at the fête, in order to avail myself thereof to procure an introduction to Miss Trelawney. Mr. Sackville must remember the circumstance."

"Perfectly," said Horace, in a cold but untrembling voice.

"I did repair to that festival," continued the Colonel: "and I obtained the wished-for introduction to Miss Trelawney, as she then was. I need not enter into particulars: suffice it to say that we walked together in a secluded avenue, allowing the ladies who accompanied her—Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot, I believe—to proceed a considerable distance a-head. My suit, which I pleaded passionately, was successful: and Miss Trelawney gave me an appointment for the ensuing Friday evening, at a place which I named."

"Friday evening!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, exchanging a rapid but meaning glance with the Prince of Wales.

"Yes—the Friday evening," returned Malpas: "and consequently before Mr. Sackville's marriage with the lady, which marriage took place on the ensuing Wednesday. One more word will suffice: Miss Trelawney met me on the Friday evening alluded to at the house of Mrs. Gale in Soho Square——"

"At what o'clock?" inquired the Marquis of Leveson.

"At nine o'clock," responded Malpas.

"And how long did she remain with you at Mrs. Gale's?" asked Lord Leveson, with another rapid, but now astonished look at the Prince Regent. "Let us have all the circumstances stated in detail and accurately recorded," he observed, making notes in his pocket-book.

"Miss Trelawney remained with me at Mrs. Gale's from nine until past eleven on that Friday evening," returned Colonel Malpas.

"But the proof of this?" said the Marquis, inquiringly.

"Here is Mrs. Gale's own certificate of the fact," answered the Colonel, tossing a folded paper towards the Marquis. "I have no more to say:" —and he resumed his seat.

The Marquis of Leveson opened the paper; and the astonishment he already felt, was enhanced when he recognised Mrs. Gale's handwriting, which was perfectly familiar to him. He had expected to find the document a forgery: but there was no doubt it was genuine, although the circumstances detailed in it might not be true for all that.

"Yes—this is Mrs. Gale's handwriting," he said: "I know and can attest it."

He then read the paper, which set forth that Colonel Malpas and Miss Venetia Trelawney (now Mrs. Sackville) had passed two hours together at her establishment, between nine and eleven o'clock, on the night of Friday, September 20th, 1814.

Malpas now felt assured that his triumph was complete: for Horace Sackville still remained silent and motionless, with the fever spots burning upon his cheeks and his lips quivering.

The Marquis and the Prince once more exchanged looks of ineffable astonishment, as if uncertain what course to pursue, and yet having it in their power to make some startling revelations: while the Earl of Curzon whispered hurriedly to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, "You see how that rascal Tash deceived us both!"

But all on a sudden, the door was thrown open with such violence that the screen was nearly upset;—and Venetia herself, followed by Captain Tash, entered the room. Robin was not however with them: he had been hastily despatched on some errand, the nature of which will speedily transpire.

Nothing could exceed the grandeur of Venetia's beauty at this moment. Her splendid form was drawn up to the full of its noble height—and, as her carriage now seemed statuesque as that of a sculptured Juno, by her shoulders being thrown back and her head being held erect, her superb bust displayed its ample development to the fullest advantage. Upheaved in its luxuriant proportions, it seemed ready to burst through the drapery that outlined its swelling contours: while the glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and lips apart, threw the spell of an almost Olympian majesty upon her transcending charms.

Every one present, save Sackville, started from his seat as the beauteous lady and her formidable-looking companion made their appearance: while Horace himself rose gently and leisurely, his features now illumined with the radiance of approaching triumph. As for Colonel Malpas, guilt and cowardice were as legibly depicted upon his ashy cheeks and in his affrighted looks, as ever the words themselves were printed on the page of a volume.

"Your Royal Highness—my lords—gentlemen," said Venetia, in a tone which, though firm, was filled with all the flute-like harmony of her soul-seeking voice,—"you have listened to the tale of accusation: now do me the justice to hear the defence."

"Most assuredly!" exclaimed the Prince Regent. "My lord," he added, turning towards Leveson, "whatever disappointment you may have experienced relative to this lady, justice must be done her. You are the chairman of the meeting—and I know you will do your duty."

"Beyond all doubt," said the Marquis, who was so dazzled and overpowered by the enchanting loveliness and Juno-like majesty of Venetia's appearance, that he forgot all the resentment excited by the scene which had occurred at his own house—he no longer remembered the incidents of the treacherous chair—but he felt suddenly inclined to do anything or everything on behalf of that woman of superhuman charms. "Let us all be seated," he exclaimed. "Horace, hand your wife a chair—and Captain Tash——"

But the gallant officer had already dropped into a seat and was stretching forth his hand to grasp the nearest decanter, before the Marquis had time to utter another syllable. The Captain likewise drew towards him three or four dishes of cakes and fruits: and as he began to eat and drink with as much coolness and absence of restraint as if the house were his own, he said, "Go on, my lord: I can always hear best when profitably employed."

Malpas made a last effort to assume an air of confidence: and by way of conciliating the formidable Captain, whom he knew to be his enemy, but whose presence on this occasion he could not account for, he said, "Make yourself at home, and don't spare the wine."

"Mrs. Sackville," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, "we are ready to hear you."

"It will be sufficient for me, my lord," answered Venetia, "simply but emphatically to deny the calumnious aspersion thrown upon me by Colonel Malpas. My husband is the proper person to conduct my defence."

"First of all, then," said Horace Sackville, "I shall request Captain Tash to state whatever he knows of the interview between Colonel Malpas and my wife at Lady Wenlock's."

"With much pleasure," observed the gallant officer, filling a tumbler with Port wine and draining it at a draught—for he contemptuously eschewed the paltry size of an ordinary wine-glass. "On the particular Wednesday night alluded to by Colonel Malpas,—for I must tell you that I have been listening outside the door to everything he has been saying,—myself and my man Robin, who is a faithful creature, were concealed amongst the bushes in Lady Wenlock's grounds. Why we were there, doesn't matter," he continued, darting a sly look at Lord Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon: "it is enough to state that we *were* there. It is true that Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter walked on in advance: but it is also true that Mrs. Sackville, as the then Miss Trelawney now is, treated the Colonel with mingled scorn, contempt, raillery, and defiance, according to the variations of language which he adopted towards her. He hinted at some conspiracy that was set on foot against her, and declared that his own most intimate friends were engaged in it. He informed her that she was the object of a wager on the part of some base and infamous voluptuaries. These were

his very words. He heard a rustling in the evergreens, and was startled. Ah! he little thought that Rolando Tash," added the Captain, with a look of terrible ferocity upon the pale, trembling, and speechless Colonel, "was concealed in the evergreens, like —like—an owl in an ivy-bush."

Here the gallant officer paused, and tossed off another tumbler of Port wine.

"Well, my lord," he continued, addressing himself to the Marquis, "the Colonel proceeded to threaten Miss Trelawney—Mrs. Sackville, I mean—in a frightful manner. My hair, though well oiled and curling naturally, stood on end. He told her that unless she yielded to his wishes, he would persecute her by all manner of means—destroy her reputation—whisper to one and breathe in the ears of another that she was his mistress—aye, and even forge letters with her name appended, to prove his tale. He gave her two weeks to deliberate——"

"Enough, Captain Tash," said Lord Leveson. "I think," he added, glancing round the table, "that we need not allow Mrs. Sackville's ears to be offended with a further recapitulation of these atrocities."

"Certainly not," exclaimed the Prince Regent, red with indignation. "Sit down, Tash, like a good fellow—and drink your wine."

"Here's a bumper, then, to your Royal Highness," said the Captain, refilling his tumbler and tossing off the contents. "And inasmuch as my Lord Marquis is an excellent chairman, I drink a bumper to him also,"—suiting the action to the word. "And forasmuch as we have a beautiful lady present, I drink a bumper to her health in particular and that of the sex in general—for I don't know what the devil we should do without them:"—then, having drained the tumbler and refilling it, he observed, "But it would be bad manners on my part not to drink to the other lords and gentlemen present——"

How long Captain Tash would have gone on with his succession of bumpers and healths, it is difficult to say: but he was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Robin, leading in Mrs. Gale of Soho Square.

A half-stifled groan now burst from the lips of Colonel Malpas, who saw that no chance remained for him, but that every available incident had been pressed into the service of his opponents. Discomfited—crushed—almost annihilated, he sate ghastly and trembling in his chair, unable to speak a word —a wretched, wretched example of mingled guilt, cowardice, and despair.

Mrs. Gale was evidently much frightened at being brought into the presence of this formidable conclave: and Robin whispered to Captain Tash that if he had not menaced her with a constable, she would not have come at all. She now confessed, after some hesitation, and with many prayers for pardon, that she had been induced to draw up and sign the certificate, which was dictated by Colonel Malpas, on condition of receiving the immediate payment of a sum of money owing to her by him. She added that the certificate was not drawn up on the day specified by the date, but some days later: and she admitted that Mrs. Sackville had never visited her establishment at all. She was then permitted to retire.

But scarcely had she left the room, when the footman entered to inform Colonel Malpas that he was wanted for a moment on very particular business.

"You must come back immediately, sir," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, sternly.

The Colonel murmured a faint "Yes," and hastily quitted the room in a state of mind not even enviable by a person about to be hanged.

On stepping into the hall, he was confronted by two individuals whose looks proclaimed their errand. One was a person of the Hebrew nation, with a cutaway coat, knee-breeches, and top-boots. He wore a spotted neckerchief with an enormous pin—a bunch of gold seals dangled from his fob—and his silk handkerchief hung half-way out of his coat-pocket. His companion was a stout, elderly, shabby man, carrying a huge stick, or rather bludgeon. He wore a great-coat buttoned over his chest, a white hat with a mourning band, and very clumsy boots.

Malpas, upon finding himself face to face with these worthies, clenched his fists in a paroxysm of rage;—and then, as the Hebrew gentleman produced a writ, the miserable Colonel staggered back and sank upon a chair.

"Five tousand guinish ish de sum, and tree guinish ish de expensh, Colonel," said the bailiff—for such he was. "Dis leetle writ ish at de shoot of Mishter Emmershon. My name ish Ikey—Moshes Ikey, at your servish; and my housh ish in Fetter Lane. Tom, keep de door."

"All right," growled the bailiff's man, planting his back against the front door.

"Thunder and lightning!" roared Captain Tash, now bursting forth from the dining-room, inside the door of which he had been listening to what was passing in the hall; "the Colonel's going to quod—but he must not escape condign punishment. You sneaking, paltry, cowardly villain!" he exclaimed, springing towards Malpas and seizing him by the nose: "you are the greatest cur and the clumsiest villain I ever knew in all my life! So take that—and that—and this—and this—and that—and that!"

And, suiting the actions to the words, the undoubtable Rolando dragged the shrieking, yelling Colonel ignominiously by the nose round the hall, bestowing upon him sundry boxes on the ears and sidelong kicks on the breech by way of chastisement. Then suddenly releasing his victim, Captain Tash gave him one parting kick which sent him flying across the hall and ultimately sprawling on the door-mat.

The whole party, Venetia excepted, had in the meantime crowded at the entrance of the dining-room to witness this scene, which excited peals of laughter;—and when it was over, they returned to their seats—Captain Tash resuming his own chair and addressing himself again to the fruit and wine as calmly and composedly as if nothing had happened.

Then, while Colonel Malpas, crushed and confounded, was taking his departure in company with Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom, the Marquis of Leveson said, "We had better conclude our business at once and leave the house of a vile impostor as soon as we can."

"But where is Robin?" inquired Sackville. "Surely we may offer him a glass of wine?"

"Oh! there he is," observed Tash, coolly: and as every eye was directed towards the point indicated by the gallant officer, a portion of Robin's form and the tip of his nose were seen betwixt the opening of the window-curtains.

It was with great difficulty he could be persuaded to come forth and drink some wine: and when he had tossed off the contents of a glass which Sackville handed him, he glided back again to his lurk-

ing-place, now completely disappearing behind the curtains.

"We have heard an infamous accusation triumphantly refuted," said the Marquis of Leveson: "and if further evidence had been required on behalf of Mrs. Sackville, his Royal Highness and myself could have supplied it. For on that very Friday night which the coward scoundrel and vile cheat named as the period of his alleged success, and between the specified hours of nine and eleven, his Royal Highness and I can declare that we were each honoured by a visit from Mrs. Sackville, then Miss Trelawney; and we both emphatically repeat what we proclaimed ere now, that we had neither of us any reason to imitate the presumptuous assertions of Colonel Malpas."

"My lord," said Venetia, her voice now sounding tremulously for the first time since she had entered the room, "I have every reason to thank you for the noble candour and impartiality with which you have conducted these proceedings:"—then, her countenance suddenly lighting up with the irradiation of good-humoured archness, she observed as she rose from her seat, "Permit me to express a hope that the next time you agree to lay wagers relative to the result of a love campaign, you will take care whom you admit into the compact and trust with the secret. Otherwise you may chance to be dishonoured by the companionship of another Colonel Malpas."

Having thus spoken with a charming air of good natured remonstrance, she bowed and moved towards the door. The Prince of Wales instantaneously sprang forward to open it for her: and as Venetia passed him, he whispered tenderly, "Does our compact hold good, my angel?"

"It does," she replied, in her softest tone. "Next Monday evening—nine o'clock—Carlton House."

And darting upon him a look of profound meaning, she issued from the room. The Prince, scarcely able to conceal the joy inspired by this response, returned to his seat: and as the screen had hidden Venetia and himself from the view of the assembled guests during that hurried interchange of whispers, the circumstance passed unnoticed.

"We have now," said the Marquis of Leveson, "but one more matter of business to dispose of—and that is to decide who has won the sweepstakes of six thousand guineas. I think there cannot be a doubt upon the subject: and with your concurrence, my friends, I shall hand over the amount to Mr. Horace Sackville."

This proposal was agreed to; and the Bank-notes, together with the purse of sovereigns, were passed round the table to Venetia's husband.

Horace consigned the notes to his pocket, saying, "I thank you all for helping me to a wife and a fortune. As for this purse, I must beg Captain Tash to accept it."

"It is in the nature of gifts that I never refuse," exclaimed the gallant officer. "And now," he continued, rising from his seat and lifting a tumbler of wine to his lips, "I must drink to the health of my friend Mr. Sackville—and long life to him! But as it would be rude not to pay my respects to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," he went on to say, refilling the tumbler he had just emptied, "I must drink to *his* health:"—then, after draining the glass, and while replenishing it, he added, "Likewise the Right Honourable the Earl of Curzon:"—and after another brief pause, during which he poured the draught down his capacious throat, he said, "Forasmuch as there is but another tumblerful in the decanter, it would be a pity not to dispose of it to advantage—and so I will drink it to the health of any whom such health may concern."

The Prince, the Marquis of Leveson, the Earl, and Sir Douglas had all drunk quite enough to be in a humour to laugh heartily at Captain Tash's freaks: nor was Horace, though far more temperate, and indeed perfectly sober, inclined to be less jovial on the occasion. But so soon as the gallant officer had exhausted all the wine as well as his catalogue of excuses for disposing of it, Sackville bade his friends good night and left the room. Venetia was waiting for him in another apartment, to which the accommodating butler had shown her: and before the newly-married couple took their departure in the carriage that was waiting for them, they informed Mr. Plumpstead that he might enter their service at Acacia Cottage on the morrow.

The carriages of the other guests were soon announced—the party broke up—and when Mrs. Malpas returned home from her plebeian relatives in the City, she heard that her husband had been soundly thrashed in the first place and taken away to a sponging-house afterwards.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE TRIAL.

On the morning that succeeded the incidents just related, the Court-house of the Old Bailey was thronged to excess: for Mr. Paul Dysart was to stand his trial on the charge of feloniously killing and slaying the Honourable George Sefton. A second count in the indictment accused him of fighting a duel and thereby breaking his Majesty's peace—although, be it observed, his Majesty was a hopeless lunatic at the time and much more likely to break the peace himself than preserve it. Such however was the legal fiction and phraseology: and Mr. Dysart was arraigned accordingly.

His wife, Lady Ernestina, was not in court: but she was close at hand—indeed, warming herself comfortably by the fire in the drawing-room of the governor of Newgate. She was a lady of rank, and was therefore thus courteously treated by the governor. Had she been a poor man's wife, she would have had to stand all day in the open street, or else at the public-house opposite the court—unless indeed she had chosen to be present during the trial.

But while the fiction of the so-called British Constitution declares that all persons are equal in the eye of the law, the administrators, functionaries, and officials of the law take very good care that such shall not be the case. Thus, inasmuch as several of the witnesses engaged in the present case were of aristocratic birth, they were accommodated with seats upon the bench: and Lord Herbert, the principal witness, sate next to the Recorder and chatted familiarly with him while the clerk was swearing the jury. Now, had the witnesses been costermongers or tinkers—or any other individuals belonging to the working-class—they would not have dared approach the sacred limit of the judicial bench.

Moreover, as Mr. Dysart had married into an aristocratic family, he was accommodated with a chair in the dock; and the turnkey who had charge of him, was desired by the governor not to stand too near "the unfortunate gentleman." We may also observe that during the whole trial, he was never spoken of, either by Judge, counsel, or witnesses, otherwise than as *Mr. Dysart*: whereas, had he been a working-man, the said Judge, counsel, and witnesses would not have thought of speaking of him otherwise than as *the prisoner* or *the accused*. Such a fortunate thing is it to be either rich or else connected with the aristocracy in this country!

Ah! poor working-men—sons and daughters of toil—producers of everything and consumers of almost nothing—ye scarcely seem to know how utterly, completely, and entirely ye are oppressed, enslaved, and trampled upon by the arrogant, indolent, and tyrannical aristocracy!

Mr. Dysart, on entering the dock, bowed politely to the Judge and jury, and then seated himself with an air of confidence and composure: for he felt assured that even if the jury should find him guilty of the most aggravated charge, and the bench should thereupon doom him to death, the Prince Regent would accord him a full pardon. He was therefore comparatively easy in his mind—looking upon the present ordeal as a great annoyance, but by no means as a predicament of terrible danger.

The jury having been sworn, and the Recorder having finished laughing at the joke which Lord Herbert had just whispered in the judicial ear, the trial commenced. The Attorney-General appeared to prosecute; and he contented himself with a mere outline of the case, very considerately abstaining from emphasis on the strongest points, and putting the weakest prominently forward as if he were actually furnishing the jury with an excuse to acquit the prisoner. But on the previous day he had prosecuted a working-man for sedition: and *then* how he exaggerated every minute detail and by his eloquence invested the feeblest point with an overwhelming power to crush the accused! But Mr. Dysart had married the niece of the Marquis of Leveson—and so the Attorney-General did not wish to send him to the scaffold.

The law-officer having opened the case, Lord Herbert was sworn as a witness. He did not leave his place on the bench near the Recorder—neither did he rise from his seat, but gave his evidence as comfortably as if lounging in his own drawing-room. He was a tall, thin man—of about fifty-five years of age—with iron-grey hair—and a sprawling, awkward, uncouth figure. He was immensely vain—outrageously arrogant—fond of hearing himself talk—and yet as empty-headed as lords generally are. He had a habit of hesitating so much in his speech, that it seemed like a natural impediment and made it painful to listen to him. In fact, he was a shallow-pated numskull; and if he had not been an aristocrat, would have been written down an ass.

"I believe, my lord," said the Attorney-General, "you are acquainted with Mr. Dysart, the gentleman whose case is under investigation?"

"Haw—hem—ah—Oh! yes—perfectly well acquainted with Mr. Dysart," responded Lord Herbert, crossing one leg over the other.

"And I believe your lordship gave a grand entertainment to a party of noblemen and gentlemen in the beginning of June, of the present year?"

"Hem—hah—haw—Oh! yes—a dinner-party."

"At which Mr. Dysart was present?"

"Haw—aye—yes—haw—Mr. Dysart was present—he—haw."

"And the lamented deceased, the Honourable George Sefton, was likewise of the party?"

"Eh—haw—hem—Oh! yes—George Sefton—haw—hem—was there."

"I believe that when the cloth was removed and the dessert was placed upon the table, a dispute arose upon some matter?"

"Oh—ah—hem—a dispute about *Tantivy*, the winner—haw—of the Oaks—hem—and also about *Old Fogey*, another crack racer—haw."

"And Mr. Dysart gave the Honourable George Sefton the lie, I believe?"

"Hem—hah—yes—I'm afraid he did. Then, you know, high words—hem—haw—ensued—and Mr. Dysart flung a glass of wine in Sefton's face—haw—haw—and Sefton flew into a rage—haw—and I don't know how it was—haw—orhow it came about exactly—hem—hem—but pistols were talked of—and—and—and—pistols were got—haw—haw—and then—yes, then——"

"Pray don't hurry yourself, my lord," said the Judge: "there's plenty of time, and we have got the whole day before us."

"Oh! certainly," observed the Attorney-General. "Your lordship was explaining with your lordship's wonted clearness and perspicuity, how pistols were obtained——"

"Ah—yes—haw—truly," exclaimed the nobleman, lolling back in his seat and running his fingers complaisantly through his hair, which stood upright all over his head. "Well—as I was saying, then—haw—he—haw—it was proposed to fight—hem—hah—across the table—and I believe—I'm afraid—hem—haw—I'm afraid Mr. Dysart fired—hem—before the signal—haw—was given. Sefton fell dead—haw—'twas a bad business—haw—and that's all I know—hem—of the matter."

And having thus given his evidence, Lord Herbert indulged in a long yawn, stretching out his sprawling legs till every joint cracked audibly.

Dysart's counsel rose to cross-examine the nobleman: but the Attorney-General threw a deprecatory look upon him; and the barrister, fearful of giving offence to the great law-officer as well as to the Judge upon the bench, contented himself by asking some trivial question just to save appearances, and resumed his seat.

The Honourable George Macnamara, who sate next to Lord Herbert, now gave his testimony to the following purport:—

"I remember the entertainment at my Lord Herbert's. It was in the beginning of June. About twelve or fourteen noblemen and gentlemen were present. I was one of the guests: Mr. Dysart was another;—and the Honourable George Sefton was likewise there. A dispute arose relative to *Tantivy* and *Old Fogey*. These horses both belonged to Mr. Sefton; and Mr. Dysart was understood to have bet heavily upon them. From a word that Mr. Sefton let fall, Mr. Dysart fancied that he did not mean the horses to run; and he called him a scoundrel and a cheat. Mr. Sefton called him a liar. We were all pretty jolly—I may

indeed say we were all drunk. Lord Herbert was certainly not sober. Mr. Dysart challenged Mr. Sefton to a duel across the table; and Lord Herbert produced his pistols. Seconds were appointed; and it was agreed that at a given signal the hostile parties should fire. This took place in Lord Herbert's dining-room. Mr. Dysart and Mr. Sefton received the pistols at the same moment; and Mr. Dysart instantaneously discharged his pistol point blank at Mr. Sefton. The signal was not given at all. Mr. Sefton uttered a cry—sprang straight up at least a foot from the floor—and then dropped dead. I am bound to say that Mr. Dysart, when he fired, exclaimed, '*Take that, you young villain!*'—or words to the same effect."

The Honourable George Macnamara, not being a peer, was subjected to some little cross-examination: but his testimony was not shaken in the slightest degree.

Lieutenant Apsley, who was also one of the party at Lord Herbert's house, was next summoned as a witness: and he not only corroborated Mr. Macnamara's evidence, but clearly proved that Dysart could not possibly have fired in the mistaken belief that the signal was given. For this signal was to consist of the words, "One—two—three," deliberately uttered; and at the last word the duellists were to fire: whereas Mr. Dysart had discharged his pistol before even the first word of the signal was spoken.

Some other evidence was given; and the case for the prosecution closed.

The prisoner's counsel made as able a speech as the damnatory nature of the evidence and his own fears of offending the "big-wigs" would allow: but he entirely glossed over the startling fact which had come out in Macnamara's evidence—namely, that Lord Herbert had supplied the pistols. Not that the point would have helped Dysart's case at all: still it was one which a conscientious barrister, unawed by the frowns of the bench, would not have failed to touch upon.

Having concluded his speech, the counsel for the defence called several witnesses to prove that Mr. Dysart was one of the mildest, most forbearing, amiable, and good-tempered men in the whole world: and inasmuch as the said witnesses (none of whom had ever seen Dysart before in their lives) had been paid ten pounds a-piece to give him this brilliant character, it must be allowed that they could not well attribute to him fewer virtues considering how handsomely they were remunerated for their trouble.

The Attorney-General rose to reply. He began by remarking that never in the whole course of his professional career had it been his good fortune to listen to evidence so lucidly, clearly, intelligibly, and impartially given as that of Lord Herbert—one of the brightest ornaments of that great and glorious Aristocracy which was the pride, the glory, and the ornament of this free, happy, and enlightened country. It was a pleasure (continued the Attorney-General) to behold a man of Lord Herbert's rank, leaving his sumptuous mansion at the West End, and cheerfully coming down to a public tribunal to further the ends and assist the aims of justice. It had been stated in the evidence of Mr. Macnamara that the party of noblemen and gentlemen assembled at Lord Herbert's mansion on the melancholy occasion alluded to, had indulged somewhat freely in the use of the grape: but surely a little excess in this manner was not to be wondered at, when it was considered how heavily the legislative duties attached to the noble lord's proud position as a peer of the realm, must at times press upon his lordship.

As the newspapers said next day, "the learned Attorney-General then went carefully over the evidence;" but so carefully did the learned gentleman perform this part of his duty, that he pretty nearly told the jury, at least in terms as plain as he dared venture upon, that they would do well to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The learned Recorder, who had been fast asleep during the Attorney-General's closing speech, now woke up: and, turning to his notes, he proceeded to sum up the case to the jury. Imitating the example of the prisoner's counsel and the Attorney-General, the learned Judge made not the slightest allusion to the fact that Lord Herbert had provided his own pistols for the duellists, and had allowed so scandalous a scene to take place at his own mansion and in his own dining-room: much less did the learned Recorder think of telling this same Lord Herbert that he ought to have been included in the indictment, as an accessory to the crime for which the prisoner was then in the presence of the jury. No such thing. But the Judge *did* also imitate the Attorney-General by travelling out of his way to eulogise Lord Herbert in particular and the Aristocracy in general: and he further took a leaf out of the Attorney-General's book by hinting that the best thing the jury could do would be to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The jury, however, seemed to take quite a different view of the matter: so that without much deliberation, and also without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of *Wilful Murder against Paul Dysart.*

Every eye was turned upon the prisoner to behold how he received the record which heralded the crowning act in the drama—namely, the condemnation to death. A sudden pallor overspread his features, as if a spasm convulsed him at the moment: but the next instant he was calm, collected, and confident as before. It was at first a frightful shock to be found guilty of *murder*, the bare mention of which terrible word was enough to make the gallows and all the dread paraphernalia of death spring up before his startled imagination: but this feeling was promptly relieved by the recollection that his wife held a document which could compel the Prince Regent to open the doors of his dungeon and recall him forth to freedom.

The Recorder put on the black cap, and in the usual stereotyped form of verbiage pronounced the awful sentence of the law—which was that Paul Dysart should be taken back to the place whence he came, and thence to a place of execution, where he should be hung by the neck until he was dead: and the Recorder concluded by expressing a hope that the Lord would have mercy upon his soul!

Execrable imposture!—vile barbarism!—diabolical iniquity! Man proves merciless in his vengeance, and yet hopes that God will be merciful. But should not Man follow the example of this Almighty Power whom he invokes?

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon—Dysart was conveyed back to Newgate—the Recorder went to dine with Lord Herbert—the Common-Sergeant took his place upon the bench—and the trial of petty felons occupied the rest of the evening. The crowd dispersed, each individual remarking to his friend "I wonder when he will be hung!"

Meantime the governor of Newgate proceeded to his drawing-room, where Lady Ernestina was seated: and, inasmuch as it suited her purpose to manifest the deepest anxiety relative to the result of the trial, he fancied it to be incumbent upon him to break the tidings as gently as possible. Then she fell into a strong fit: and when she had performed this little piece of tragedy, she wildly demanded to see her dear, dear husband!

The governor accordingly conducted Lady Ernestina to Dysart's cell: and precipitating herself into his arms, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses. The governor retired: and then the lady grew calmer. Dysart was completely deceived by her manner, her words, her looks, and her tears; and he fancied she experienced a return of all that enthusiastic affection which had formerly induced her to become his wife.

"I don't altogether deserve so much kindness at your hands, Ernestina," he said: "but I'll make up for the past when once I am out of this cursed place. Don't cry—the annoyance and vexation are only temporary——"

"But to think that such a dreadful sentence should ever have been passed!" exclaimed Ernestina, with a simulation of the profoundest emotion.

"Well, we were not altogether unprepared for it—at least I was not," said her husband: "and, thank heaven, you have got a talisman which will speedily open these prison-doors. Ah! how surprised the Prince will be to find that the lady of his romantic adventure at Beechey Manor is none other than the niece of his intimate friend the Marquis of Leveson!"

"And when shall I communicate with his Royal Highness?" asked Ernestina. "Since I have returned to my uncle's residence, he has not once called——"

"You must see the Prince to-morrow, Ernestina," said Dysart, impressively. "There is no time to be lost. The Recorder will make his report next week——"

"Yes—I will see the Prince to-morrow, if possible," observed Lady Dysart. "Shall I go to Carlton House—or write and beg an interview?"

"Whichever you think advisable. But of course his Royal Highness can do nothing *officially* until after he has received the Recorder's report: before that report is made, the Prince is supposed to know nothing of the case. But *privately* it will be as well not only to prepare him for what he will have to do, but also to exact from him a promise that he will comply with the terms of the solemn compact he has signed."

"Yes—I will see him to-morrow, Paul," said Ernestina: "and afterwards, if it be not too late, I will hasten hither with the particulars of our interview."

"And if it should be too late to-morrow evening, you will come early on the following day?" said Dysart, interrogatively.

"Ah! I shall be only too glad to bring you good news," she answered, apparently with much emotion. "But the result cannot be otherwise—for the Prince Regent must and shall fulfil the terms of his compact."

"It rests only with you to compel him," observed Dysart: then, in a solemn tone, he added, "Remember, Ernestina, my life is in your hands!"

"And I will save it," she exclaimed, flinging herself into his arms.

She then took leave of her husband;—and as she returned in a hackney-coach to Leveson House in Albemarle Street, she said to herself, "All suspicion on his part is lulled asleep—he places the fullest confidence in me—and I must manage to retain it until the very last!"

Then, as she threw herself back in the vehicle, she felt a cold shudder thrill through her form at the thought that if her plans were carried out with success, the ground which she had just passed over in the Old Bailey would in a few short days be covered with a densely packed multitude to witness the crowning catastrophe in Dysart's career: but, angry with herself the next moment for giving way to what she deemed a weakness, she murmured, "Yes—it is necessary: I must be rid of this demon whom I conjured up to torment me. Ah! it is the tenderest love which turns to the bitterest hatred and seeks for the most terrible vengeance!"

On arriving in Albemarle Street Ernestina was informed that her uncle the Marquis was engaged with Mrs. Owen of Richmond: and she was therefore compelled to wait till this lady had taken her departure, before she could see Lord Leveson. We may observe that Ernestina knew nothing of the conspiracy that had been hatched against the Princess of Wales, and in which the three eldest Misses Owen were engaged: and she therefore attributed her uncle's intimacy with the mother of those young ladies to an affair of gallantry.

The Marquis and Mrs. Owen remained in private discussion together for nearly an hour;—and at the expiration of this interval, when the lady had taken her departure, Ernestina had an opportunity of communicating to her noble uncle the result of the trial at the Old Bailey.

"Now, then, Ernestina," he said, with a look of deep meaning, "you will be enabled to carry out your projects, as you have explained them to me."

"I shall, my dear uncle," she responded: "but they will require the utmost tact and caution—and I must continue to play the hypocrite towards Dysart with such consummate skill——"

"Which you will be enabled to do, Ernestina," added the Marquis, who seemed to be in a desperate hurry about something. "But I must leave you to work out these schemes by yourself—for I am compelled to undertake a journey to France——"

"To France!" exclaimed Lady Dysart, in astonishment.

"Yes—and without delay, too—on very important business indeed," said the Marquis. "I have ordered my travelling-carriage and shall depart in an hour, the moment I have eaten a mouthful of dinner."

"You will travel all night, then?" said Ernestina. "It is now past seven o'clock."

"Yes—I shall travel without stopping to Dover, where I hope to arrive at about three in the morning. I can then snatch a few hours' sleep, and sail by the packet-boat at ten or eleven. Let us sit down to dinner, then—for I am sure you must be in want of refreshment after so exciting and disagreeable a day."

"Not disagreeable as to the result of the trial," observed Lady Dysart, significantly.

The uncle and niece now repaired to the dining-room, where they continued their discourse as they partook of the repast, until a domestic announced that the travelling-carriage was in readiness. The Marquis then took an affectionate leave of his niece, in whose hands he placed a cheque for a sum of money to meet her wants during his absence: and in a few minutes he was whirled as rapidly away as four post-horses and a lightly-constructed vehicle could bear him.

Ernestina remained alone in the dining-room, pondering upon the various circumstances which had occurred within the last few weeks, and revolving in her mind the plans and projects which they had been so fertile in suggesting. In this manner an hour slipped away—and the clock had struck nine, when a footman entered to announce that a person wished to speak to her ladyship upon a matter of some importance.

"A person! Who is it?" she ejaculated, impatiently.

"A man, your ladyship: but he refuses to give his name or state his business."

"Perhaps it is the Marquis whom he wants——"

"No, my lady: I told him that his lordship had just left London, and he said it was to your ladyship he wished to speak."

"Then show him in," exclaimed Ernestina, wondering who the individual could be.

The domestic bowed and withdrew—but almost immediately returned, ushering in a man dressed in a coarse style, with a great thick coat, a neckerchief drawn up to his mouth, and a broad-brimmed hat in his hand. The servant retired—the man advanced—and as the light fell upon his features, Ernestina instantaneously recognised the individual who had dug the grave for her paramour!

CHAPTER LX.

UNPLEASANT VISITORS.

A COLD chill fell upon the lady, as if her flesh had suddenly come in contact with the slimy coils of a serpent: and the colour fled from her cheeks. She was struck as if with an omen of evil—for the appearance of this man, whom she only knew by the name of Jones, and which name she believed to be an assumed one, was indeed but too well calculated of itself, apart from any repugnant associations connected with him, to arouse a mortal terror in her soul.

"What do you want?—what do you require?" she demanded, in a voice that was nearly suffocated by her emotions.

"I just want to have a few words with your ladyship—that's all," said the man: and advancing towards the fire, he coolly and deliberately took a seat.

Ernestina fell back in the chair from which she had started on his entrance: but composing herself as well as she was able, she made a sign for him to continue.

"Your husband, ma'am—I mean your ladyship's husband," he resumed, endeavouring to give his hang-dog countenance an insinuating look, "has got himself into a precious scrape—and if he don't mind he'll be a croaker before ten days are over."

"But what do you want with me?" demanded Ernestina, impatiently.

"I'll explain myself all in good time," he continued. "If you're in a hurry, I'm not particularly so—and there's the difference. Besides, you shouldn't look so precious glum at an old acquaintance. I suppose you know it was me that got up the expedition that night when the Prince and the Marquis were taken to the Manor: and of course you know it was me that dug the grave at the Blackheath villa. Well, I was treated like a gentleman by your ladyship's husband—he paid me handsome—and now I want to serve him. That's the object of my business."

"But who are you?" demanded Ernestina, who had shuddered visibly when the wretch alluded to the digging of the grave.

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the man. "Mr Dysart told me when I was at Beechey Manor that you only knew me by the name of Jones. Nevertheless, my name is no more Jones than your ladyship's is: and as there's no use for any disguise or concealment that I can see, I may as well explain to you at once that my proper name is Dan'el Coffin——"

"What! the Public Executioner!" cried the miserable lady, springing to her feet and gazing upon the man with horror depicted upon her countenance: then, as the account of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's, and which she had read in the newspapers, flashed to her mind, she instantaneously understood the circumstances in which Daniel Coffin had sought refuge at Beechey Manor with the pseudonym of Jones.

"Don't alarm yourself, ma'am," said Coffin, with imperturbable coolness: "I ain't come to hang you. But pray sit down again—you see I make myself at home, because I want to speak to you on very particular business; and the more you won't hear me, the longer you'll keep me."

Struck by the truth of this remark, and anxious to get rid of her dreadful visitor as soon as possible, Ernestina reseated herself, and again made a hurried motion for him to continue.

"Well, my lady," resumed Coffin, "as I was observing just now, Mr. Dysart has got into a precious hobble—and as the Recorder will make his report at the beginning of next week, it will be all dickey with your husband ten days hence if so be nothing's done in the meantime. Now, as I've watched Old Bailey cases for some years past and am pretty familiar with 'em, I can tell your ladyship that there's no hope of a reprieve, much less of pardon, seeing the jury didn't recommend him to mercy. It's clear, then—and there's no use in deceiving oneself—that he'll be scragged on Monday week: and so, as I've a great respect for him, I want to know what you'll give if I help him to escape out of Newgate."

"Escape!" cried Ernestina, recoiling from the bare idea of a result which would fatally frustrate all her plans.

"Ah! you may well be astonished at such a proposal, ma'am," said Coffin, entirely mistaking the cause of her sudden start and emphatic exclamation. "But I don't think it's altogether impossible. At least it's worth while to have a try for it. You see that as your husband's a genelman and connected with the aristocracy, he will be allowed many indulgences which poor devils in trouble couldn't obtain for either love or money: and as you can visit him without being searched, you can easily take him a file and a jemmy. A jemmy, ma'am, is a small crow-bar—a very handy thing at times, as genelmen of the crack and pannie profession well know. It's the best thing to open a shop with, ma'am—a capital stock in trade, as one may say, for an enterprising individual anxious to set his-self up in business. Well, my lady, if Mr. Dysart can get out of the condemned crib and manage to reach the roof of the Stone Jug—or even let himself into one of the yards—I could have a party of leary chaps all in readiness outside, to help him to do the rest: and then, a post-chaise and four spanking horses being close at hand——"

"I thank you," interrupted Ernestina, who had listened thus far with the tortures of impatience: "but your proposal cannot be accepted. My uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, has written a strong and appealing letter to the Prince Regent on my unfortunate husband's behalf; and I have every hope and confidence therein. But should Mr. Dysart endeavour to escape and be caught in the fact, all chance of reprieve or pardon would be frustrated. I shall give you five guineas for your trouble in calling upon me——"

But scarcely had Ernestina taken out her purse as she thus spoke, when the footman entered the room, saying, "Mr. Lawrence Sampson wishes to speak to your ladyship."

Coffin had started up the instant the handle of the door was heard to turn—and thus the domestic did not observe that he had been previously sitting in a familiar manner in Lady Ernestina Dysart's company. But when the terrible name of the Bow Street officer was mentioned, the Hangman became visibly troubled. Ernestina saw in a moment that a scene was to be avoided in the presence of the footman: and, with admirable composure, she immediately said, "Show Mr. Sampson into the adjoining room."

The domestic retired: and the instant the door closed behind him, the lady said in a hurried, altered, and even hollow tone, "Do you think he has tracked you hither?"

"It looks like it," answered Coffin. "And yet, if he had, he wouldn't send in to say he wanted to speak to you—but he would make a rush of it at once with his runners—or else lie in wait in the street till I went out again."

"But what on earth can he want with me?" said the lady, trembling from head to foot, the thought of the tragedy at the Blackheath villa being uppermost in her mind.

"Oh! he doesn't want you, ma'am, for any harm," returned Daniel Coffin: "or else he'd have come bang in and have taken you at once. I'm up to all the dodges of these rum customers. Most likely, after all, he's got a scent of me; and not being quite sure of it, is come to ask whether such a genelman as Mr. Dan'el Coffin has paid your ladyship a visit this evening. You'd better not keep him waiting——"

"No—it would be imprudent," said Ernestina: then, somewhat reassured by the observations of the Hangman relative to herself, she placed the five guineas upon the table, observing, "You can leave the house quietly in a few moments."

She then quitted the apartment: and summoning all her courage to her aid, she entered the adjoining room, where Mr. Sampson rose from a seat and made her a profound salutation.

"Your ladyship will pardon me for intruding at this late hour, and at a moment when your ladyship's grief must be so acute after the sad result of to-day," began the officer: "but I am sure that when I mention the object of my intrusion, and when I add that I shall not detain your ladyship three minutes——"

"You need not apologise, Mr. Sampson," interrupted Ernestina, now regaining complete confidence, as she felt assured that neither his manner nor his words denoted a hostile intent. "I am indeed overwhelmed with sorrow: but you must not think that I bear any ill will towards yourself. I know that in arresting my husband, you only did your duty——"

"Thank your ladyship for that acknowledgment," said the officer.

"Be seated, Mr. Sampson," continued Ernestina, affably motioning towards a chair—but principally exhibiting this courtesy in order to gain sufficient time to enable Daniel Coffin to effect a safe retreat from the house: then, as she herself took a seat, she said, "And now, Mr. Sampson, you can explain the purpose of your visit."

As Ernestina spoke, she affected a profound mournfulness: and now she held her handkerchief to her face as if to conceal her tears on account of her husband, but really to veil the emotion which she might experience in case Sampson addressed her upon any unpleasant topic. And it was well that she took this precaution: for the very first words which he proceeded to utter in explanation of his visit, sent the blood with an ice-chill to her heart and made her entire form thrill with horror and alarm.

"Your ladyship is probably aware that in the month of June last Sir Archibald Malvern, a baronet living in Hanover Square, disappeared suddenly and in a most mysterious manner. His son, Mr. Valentine—or Sir Valentine, as he ought perhaps to be called—entrusted to me the duty of making all possible researches to ascertain the fate of his parent: but my proceedings and inquiries in the matter have hitherto proved completely abortive. This evening, however, an incident has transpired which seems to throw a glimmer of light—faint and feeble, it is true—upon the occurrence."

"But how can this possibly regard me, Mr. Sampson?" inquired Ernestina, anxious to be relieved from the tortures of an excruciating suspense; and removing her handkerchief from her face, she threw a hurried glance upon him:—then, perceiving that there was nothing ominous in his looks nor manner, she felt her courage revive.

"It does not regard your ladyship," was the answer: "but it may regard Mr. Dysart."

"Good heavens! surely you would not attri-

bute to him the perpetration of such a crime!" exclaimed Ernestina. "Is he not sufficiently crushed——"

"Pardon me, my lady," interrupted Sampson: "but no suspicion of the sort has been excited with reference to your ladyship's husband. Grant me a few minutes—and I will explain myself. I must inform your ladyship, in the strictest confidence, that Mr. Dysart's arrest took place at Beechey Manor in consequence of an anonymous letter sent early the same morning to Bow Street, and which letter was instantaneously placed by the magistrate in my hands."

"An anonymous letter!" exclaimed Ernestina, with well affected surprise and indignation.

"Yes—here it is," said Larry Sampson, as he produced *her own note* and handed it to her—that same note which she had despatched by old Underdown to the office at Bow Street, as the reader cannot fail to remember.

She took it with trembling hands and pale countenance: and as she pretended to run her eyes over its contents—those well known contents—she made a desperate struggle to regain her courage.

"Your ladyship may well be annoyed," observed Sampson—for even the astute and cunning officer was liable to mistake the causes of emotion and excitement now and then. "You are disgusted at the treachery practised by the annonymous correspondent—and you are shocked at observing the handwriting to be that of a lady, and evidently an accomplished one."

"Ah! Dysart has proved false to me—and it is doubtless his mistress who thus betrayed him!" cried Ernestina, with all the appearance of the most genuine anguish. "But what has this to do with the disappearance of Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"I will tell your ladyship. This evening Mr.

Valentine Malvern called upon me—as he often does—to inquire whether I had made any progress in my researches. I received him in a room where a number of papers lay scattered upon a table. This letter was unguardedly left amongst them: in fact, it lay open. His eye happened to catch a glimpse of it: he seized it—greedily devoured its contents—examined the writing with the utmost attention—and then cried out, '*Yes—'tis the same—'tis the same!*' To be brief, he explained to me that amongst his father's papers he had some weeks back discovered a note in a beautiful female hand, but without date, address, or signature, and the contents of which, though worded with a caution amounting to ambiguity, indicated a gallant intrigue. The handwriting of that tender epistle and of this anonymous letter are the same—and Mr. Valentine Malvern had instantaneously recognised the fact. What, then, is the inference which he drew? Why, that the writer of the anonymous letter is most probably known to Mr. Dysart—perhaps some lady who has a spite against him: and if it could be ascertained who she is, it would as a matter of course at the same time establish the identity of the fair and frail correspondent of the lost Sir Archibald Malvern. Not that even this discovery might clear up the mystery of his disappearance: still there is just the possibility that it would do so;—and Mr. Valentine is naturally impelled by a restless anxiety to leave no stone unturned in the investigation of his father's fate."

"I understand, Mr. Sampson—it is natural—very natural," said Ernestina, now terribly alarmed lest the officer should take it into his head to go and question her husband upon the subject and show him the anonymous letter, the writing of which he could not fail to recognise as her own. "But wherefore have you come to me?" she asked, in order to glean his views and intentions.

"Mr. Valentine Malvern begged and implored that I would lose no time in seeing your ladyship upon the subject: for he thought that painful as it must be to either your husband or yourself to be intruded upon at such a moment, it would notwithstanding be *less* improper or indelicate under existing circumstances to appeal to your ladyship than to Mr. Dysart in the matter."

"The handwriting is altogether unknown to me, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina: "nor am I aware that my unfortunate husband had any reason to fear a lady's rancorous revenge. But if you will leave this note with me, I will break the subject to him to-morrow——"

"Ah! if your ladyship would be so kind!" exclaimed Sampson. "I know it must be a painful task for you to undertake, and that it cannot be otherwise than repugnant to your feelings: but when your ladyship reflects that a clue might be formed to the clearing up of a deep mystery——"

"I am quite ready to sacrifice my own feelings in the matter for the sake of a fellow-creature," observed Lady Ernestina Dysart: "and as I had some slight acquaintance with Sir Archibald Malvern, and his son is not altogether a stranger to me, it will afford me a melancholy satisfaction, in the midst of my own deep sorrows, to be in any way serviceable in this matter."

"Your ladyship will ensure the lasting gratitude of Mr. Valentine Malvern," said Larry Sampson, rising from his seat. "I will take the liberty of calling to-morrow evening to learn the result of your ladyship's interview with Mr. Dysart, so far as this business is concerned."

The Bow Street officer then took his departure, to the infinite relief of Lady Ernestina, who had passed through an ordeal of harrowing tortures, bewildering sensations, and poignant memories during this interview.

But the moment the door of the apartment closed behind Mr. Lawrence Sampson, she flung the anonymous letter into the fire: and as she beheld it flame up and consume, she murmured to herself, "Thus perish the only evidence that existed of my perfidy towards Dysart."

She then bethought herself of Daniel Coffin the Hangman: and returning into the room where she had left him, she found it unoccupied and therefore concluded he had taken his departure. Banishing him from her thoughts, she now sate down to her writing-desk and penned the ensuing note:—

"*Leveson House, Oct. 11th, 1814.*

"Lady Ernestina Dysart presents her dutiful compliments to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and humbly requests that his Royal Highness will honour her with a call to-morrow at eleven o'clock punctually. Lady Ernestina is well aware that under ordinary circumstances this demand would savour of the most insolent presumption: but as the circumstances are *extraordinary* and *peculiar*, she ventures to hope that his Royal Highness will vouchsafe compliance with her prayer, and that the visit thus besought will be paid with as much privacy as possible."

Having sealed and addressed this billet, Ernestina gave it to a domestic to take at once to Carlton House: and as it was now past ten o'clock and she was wearied with the exciting occurrences of the day, she retired to her own chamber.

But in the meantime, what had really become of Mr. Daniel Coffin?

When left by himself in the dining-room, he suddenly fell into a profound perplexity how to act. The visit of Mr. Lawrence Sampson was, to say the least, alarming;—and despite all the reasoning which the Hangman conjured up to persuade himself that the officer's presence had no reference to him, his evil conscience would not allow this idea to be so easily relied upon. That Sampson might have entered the house upon some pretext, but with the real object of making a *reconnoitre*, was probable enough; and in this case he had doubtless planted his followers in the street. At all events, Daniel Coffin did not deem it prudent to issue forth at once: while, on the other hand, he could not very well remain in the dining-room, during Ernestina's absence, without exciting the suspicions of any domestic who might chance to enter it.

He knew not exactly what to do: and it was without any fixed intention, but in obedience to one of those vague and undefined impulses which often prompt desperate men, that he gently opened the dining-room door and looked out into the hall. The porter had gone down to supper—not a living soul met the Hangman's view by the light of the lamp suspended to the ceiling in the hall.

A thought struck him! He had been told by the domestic, on his arrival, that the Marquis of Leveson was away from home; and Ernestina was therefore mistress of the establishment in her noble

master's absence. What if he were to hide himself for a few hours—until the next night even—in one of the unoccupied apartments of the spacious dwelling? Were he discovered, Ernestina must be appealed to in order to decide how the intruder was to be disposed of; and she *dared* not deal harshly with him. On the contrary, he would be safe beneath her protection. But then, as to food? He could very well wait four-and-twenty hours in a fasting condition when his personal security was concerned; and at all events it would be better to incur any risk or privation within the house than stand the chance of encountering Mr. Lawrence Sampson's myrmidons outside the threshold.

Rapid as thought alone can travel, did these reflections sweep through the brain of Daniel Coffin as he stood at the dining-room door, looking forth into the hall. There was also something in the adventure that pleased him; and his resolve was soon taken accordingly. Hastily ascending the great marble staircase, he reached the landing on the first storey, and opened the nearest door. It led into the Crimson Drawing-room which has been mentioned in preceding chapters. The fire was smouldering in the grate—two wax candles were burning upon the mantel-piece—and a tray, containing a couple of decanters of wine and a dish of biscuits, stood upon the table. This little refreshment had been served up for Mrs. Owen when she called upon the Marquis that afternoon; and the tray had not been removed.

The Hangman was well pleased at the sight thereof; and he speedily poured at least a pint of sherry down his capacious throat. This was so much to his taste, that he lost no time in paying his respects with equal devotion to the Port; and in a few minutes the decanters were completely drained. He then filled one of his ample pockets with the greater portion of the biscuits; and having thus self-appropriated the provender, he proceeded to examine the room with more attention than at first.

To remain concealed here was hopeless. The domestics, ere they retired for the night, would come to put out the fire and extinguish the candles. Whither should he go? Scarcely had he asked himself this question, when his eyes settled upon a door opposite to the one by which he had entered. He advanced to try it, but found it locked. This was no particularly formidable obstacle to Mr. Daniel Coffin. He felt in his pocket—drew forth a bunch of skeleton keys—and speedily opened the door. Taking one of the wax-tapers from the mantel, he passed into the adjoining room: and now, as the reader will no doubt have already understood, the Hangman had entered the first of that mysterious suite of apartments which Venetia Trelawney was led to explore on the evening of her visit to Leveson House.

Having hastily glanced around the room, which we have previously described as small but luxuriously furnished, the Hangman observed that there were wax-tapers upon the mantel. He accordingly lighted one of them, and then took back the one which he carried in his hand into the Crimson Drawing-room. This he did to prevent its being missed: and having restored it to its place, he retraced his way into the other apartment, carefully locking himself in by means of the skeleton key that had afforded him ingress.

He now examined this room with admiration and delight, muttering to himself a wish that he was the owner of that little paradise. Having attentively surveyed the sofas ranged round the walls, the vases of flowers, and the various articles of furniture, his eyes were uplifted towards the silver lamp that was suspended to the ceiling, but which was not burning now. After contemplating it for about a minute, he stood upon a chair to examine it more closely;—and thus convincing himself that it was real silver, he muttered, "Old Jeremy would give me a pretty penny for this! Well, I don't think I need go away empty-handed when I do take my departure."

Grimly smiling at this pleasant conceit, and already regarding the silver lamp as his own, Mr. Daniel Coffin descended from the chair—took a taper from the mantel—and passed into the adjoining room. This was smaller but more luxuriously furnished than the one he had just left; and instead of sofas, it contained *a number of large and massive arm-chairs, each provided with a cushion of immense size.* But there was no choice collection of fruits, sweets, and wines now upon the table—nor was the lamp with the ground-glass globe now lighted—as was the case when we introduced Venetia Trelawney to this apartment.

Without pausing many minutes, Daniel Coffin proceeded to open the door which faced him; and, still holding the taper in his hand, he entered the gallery of pictures and sculptures. At first he was not inclined to pay much attention to these works of art: but their subjects speedily altered his mood, turning his indifference into eager curiosity, wonder, and sensual delight. We have already in a previous chapter depicted a few of the statuary groups and glanced at one of the pictures: but we must now observe that there were other groups and other pictures the flagrant indecency of which would even have brought a blush to the cheeks of the inmates of a brothel. From the entrance of this gallery to the further extremity, the works of art became successively more and more indelicate, as if the whole purpose of the arrangement were gradually to lead on the imagination from the first petty shock, through all the phases of enhancing allurement, into the crowning grossness of the most nude and undisguised lasciviousness.

"Well, 'pon my soul, these noblemen are precious rum fellows to have such scenes as these in their houses," thought Daniel Coffin to himself, as with increasing amazement he passed along the gallery. "By goles! it gets worse and worse! If any body had told me he'd seen such a place in a nobleman's mansion, I shouldn't have believed him. And now that I recollect, this Marquis of Leveson is always holding forth in the House of Lords about the bad morals of the lower orders and the desecration of the Sabbath! Well, some men *are* hypocrites—rank impostors too! What statues—what paintings! The farther I advance, the more I seem to learn in the lessons of indecency. I suppose the Marquis brings his ladies here sometimes. I wonder whether his niece Ernestina has ever set foot in this gallery. If she has, she can't be much better than she should be: and I dare say she's not too. In fact, I suppose the Prince was enticed to Beechey Manor that night to be captivated by her charms. But Dysart kept his real motive snug enough, whatever it was. Well

'pon my soul—my head begins to turn, and I feel all no-how looking at these pictures and images. Why, the purest virgin that ever stepped would leave this gallery as corrupt in mind as if she had passed through twenty years of debauchery and profligacy. Nell Gibson, who frequents the dark crib at the Folly Bridges, isn't so bad but that she'd be made worse by a ten minutes' walk up and down this gallery. And everything is so beautifully done too—the paintings as well as the statues! What a mint of money all this must have cost—and what a lot of sculptors and artists must have been employed to furnish so many different things! Aye, and doesn't the old Marquis come at times and gloat over them. What a many women have no doubt lost their virtue in consequence of a visit to this place: and what tales these walls could tell if they only had the gift of speech! But only suppose that a poor devil was to be seen selling cheap pictures and prints half so bad as these great expensive paintings—wouldn't the constables be down upon him in a jiffey, and no mistake!"

While thus musing, Mr. Daniel Coffin brought his inspection of the gallery to a close; and issuing forth, he returned into the room containing the large arm-chairs. .. .

"Well, I think one of these concerns will be even more comfortable to sleep in for the night than the sofas in the room beyond," he thought to himself as he glanced slowly around. "Besides, I always sleep too heavy when I lay down—and I musn't stand a chance of being surprised napping."

Having come to this conclusion, the Hangman placed the wax-candle upon the table, and then deposited himself in one of the arm-chairs. But scarcely had he dropped his person upon the voluptuous-looking cushion, when a sharp click, like a clock giving warning, struck his startled ear; and at the same instant his wrists were caught in the manacles and his shoulders were fast griped by the strong steel bands that sprang forth from the wood-work of the treacherous chair.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Hangman, with a desperate struggle to release himself.

But his efforts would not have been more vain or futile, had a tremendous boa-constrictor suddenly wound its massive coils around him: the manacles were immoveable—the steel bands held his shoulders in an inextricable gripe—and the very chair itself was solidly fastened by the legs to the floor.

Finding that his endeavours were useless, and exhausted by their unavailing strenousness, the Hangman suddenly desisted from any further struggling with the treacherous chair and its potent mechanism: and as a subdued imprecation fell from his lips, the chill sweat of profound terror burst forth all over him, saturating his very garments and making his shirt cling to him like the cold clammy grave-clothes of the dead!

CHAPTER LXI.

ERNESTINA AND THE PRINCE.

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the incidents just related; and Ernestina was alone in the Crimson Drawing Room.

She was seated near a harp—and it was evident from her looks and her manner that she was studying a part which she had to play. We do not mean aught in reference to music, although the instrument was there close at hand—but in reference to coquetry and seductive allurement.

Her hair was arranged in massive bands over her alabaster temples, and gathered with a graceful sweep in such a way that it showed the small and well folded ears. She had selected a dress which displayed her fine form to its most exciting and sensuous advantage, leaving the white plump shoulders bare, and allowing the grand fulness of the bosom to swell in more than half its glowing amplitude above the body of the robe. By a gentle inclination of her figure towards the harp, she was enabled to give her bright and polished neck so swan-like a curve that nothing could exceed the beauty of its arching gracefulness;—and, with an admirable prescience of coquettish effect mingled with a seductive languor, she knew that this position would enable the eye of a beholder to trace the symmetry of that sweet neck in its gradual and downward expansion into the noble foundation on which it rested.

The volume and voluptuous form of her bust were in this manner developed to the fullest advantage: and as she leant towards the harp with all the seeming ease and gracefulness of this really studied attitude, she threw into her looks a melancholy softness which added to the power of her great beauty. Her whole figure was thus sensuously languid and voluptuously drooping: her eyes were half-veiled by the long lashes beneath which their expression became all the more wanton—and the ripeness and fulness of her shape bespoke a subdued passion as profound and as luxurious as the looks that shone from under the softly drooping lids.

It was a very cold, damp, raw October day, with a leaden sky and a misty atmosphere: but the air of the Crimson Drawing-room was warm and perfumed. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate—and the porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance that stole upon the sense without overpowering it.

But why, just as the time-piece upon the mantel struck eleven, did Lady Ernestina Dysart assume that studied air of mournful pensiveness and sensuous languor, as she bent towards the harp? Because a carriage had that moment stopped at the front-door—and she was at no loss to conjecture who the visitant was.

In less than a minute a domestic entered, announcing his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. The man immediately retired, closing the door behind him: but Ernestina retained that pensive attitude, as if she were so profoundly absorbed in her reflections that she heard not the entrance of the Prince nor the annunciation of his name.

We must here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had called in compliance with Ernestina's note. He was not aware that he had as yet ever seen this lady: but he had heard much of her beauty—and he was not the man to let pass the opportunity of satisfying himself whether report spoke truly in that respect. Besides, he fancied that her ladyship might have something important to communicate from her uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, of whose abrupt departure for the Continent he was already aware. Several

reasons therefore induced him, even at some little inconvenience, to comply with the terms of Lady Ernestina Dysart's note: but now that he was ushered into the room where she was seated, he was somewhat surprised to observe the deep absorption and pensiveness of her attitude.

Her back was turned towards him, as she sate bending over the harp. He stood still for a few moments, struck by the dazzling whiteness of her neck and shoulders—the elegant shape of her head—and the flowing outlines of her figure. Still she remained motionless. He advanced a little, and now obtained a glimpse of the bust which glowed in the unveiled luxuriance of its charms against the harp. Upon that grandly developed bosom did the eyes of the royal voluptuary settle: and at the same instant Ernestina, affecting still to remain unconscious of his presence, and with half averted countenance, began to touch the strings of the instrument.

She was an accomplished musician—and the harp gave forth such sounds that ravished the ears of the Prince. The melody stole softly and sensuously upon him, in unison with the voluptuous feelings engendered by the beauteous form on which his eyes rested. The very warmth of the room and fragrance of the atmosphere increased this melting effect, dissolving all his soul into an ineffable tenderness. He stood like one enchanted: his pulses thrilled—the colour deepened upon his countenance—his eyes swam in passion's liquid fire. It seemed as if some unknown paradise on earth were opening to his comprehension at a moment when he had little expected that any such blissful development was in store for him.

And now, gradually did the lady turn her countenance in such a way towards the harp, that he caught her profile with that half-vanishing effect which Rembrandt loved so well to depict upon his canvass: and as the light, borrowing a roseate tint from the hue of the crimson curtains which shaded the windows, fell upon that faultless profile, the Prince started with a sudden recollection. But the lady still affected to perceive him not—and at the instant that he thus started, she made the splendid instrument give forth such a glorious volume of gushing golden melody that he was again struck motionless and transfixed with ineffable rapture.

But now he studied that profile intently: he marked also the glossy light brown hair—the high and polished brow: He saw the long silken lashes he observed the dark eye flashing beneath—he traced the outline of the aquiline nose, the well-cut lips of vivid scarlet, and the softly rounded chin. Then again did his looks settle upon the grand exuberance of the bosom that was now heaving visibly—white as snow, but warm and glowing to the eye: and then his looks once again travelled upward to the face which was gradually turning more and more towards him. The sea-shell pink which naturally belonged to her complexion was now deepening into the rich carnation hue: the blush gradually descended to her neck—thence suffusing itself over her bosom;—and the longer the Prince gazed, the more convinced did he become that his lips had glued themselves in impassioned kisses to those glowing cheeks—that his hand had pressed and his head been pillowed upon that heaving, swelling bosom—and that the entire form had lain palpitating with love and desire in his arms!

Slowly now did Ernestina raise her head and turn her eyes towards him,—those large lustrous eyes looking up full into his, and swimming with that oriental languor which he had observed and which had ravished him before! Aye—and he was no longer uncertain nor in doubt as to where and when those seductive looks had previously shed their elysian influence upon his soul: and falling on his knees at the lady's feet, he exclaimed, "Heavens! are you my lovely unknown—unknown no longer—but Ernestina Dysart?

"Oh! then you are not angry with me, beloved Prince?" murmured the syren, flinging her snowy arms around his neck.

"Angry with you—impossible!" cried the royal voluptuary, straining her to him even as he knelt, and covering her warm and glowing cheeks with passionate kisses. "But what means this mystery?" he exclaimed at length, rising and taking a chair by her side. "Are you really Lady Ernestina Dysart, the niece of my friend Leveson?—and if so, what meant that scene of mingled outrage, mystery, and love which characterised the night of our first acquaintance?"

"I will tell you everything in good time, my dear Prince," answered the lady, as she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses with an appearance of the fondest affection. "But whatever the explanations may be, promise——"

"I can promise anything—everything—to such a charmer as you," interrupted the Prince, his head already turning with blissful rapture, as on the night at Beechey Manor. "Ah! how rejoiced I am that we have met again!"—and he devoured her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom with his burning kisses. "But tell me what you have to say—and then—and then—talk to me of love, only of love!"

"Listen patiently if you will, and attentively if you can, for a few minutes," said Ernestina, with a smile of such delicious archness and with a look of such wanton meaning that a lava-stream of fierce and fiery passion boiled in the veins of the amorous Prince: for her lips revealed rows of pearl and seemed to breathe the ambrosial fragrance of paradise, and her glances went with an electric influence to his very heart's core.

"Let me pillow my head here," he said, reclining it upon her shoulder: "and now proceed. I am all attention."

"In the first place, then," she resumed, "you must know that I am really that same Ernestina whom you have named, and that the Marquis of Leveson is my uncle. Before I married that wretched being, Dysart, and when I was living beneath this roof, my uncle would never allow me to meet your Royal Highness when you called. He took every precaution to prevent me from being seen by you——"

"Ah! the sly dog," murmured the Prince: "he knew that to behold you would be to love you. But go on, my dear Ernestina—go on."

"Moreover," she continued, "he would never permit me to attend any balls or parties at which you were likely to be present—and he invariably found some excuse for not introducing me at Court. After my marriage—my unfortunate, unhappy, hated marriage——"

"Ah! you do not love your husband, then?" said the Prince.

"I hate—I detest—I abhor him!" cried Ernestina emphatically. "Besides," she immediately added in a subdued and murmuring tone, "I love you—and you only!"

"Thanks for that assurance, my angel," said the Prince, pressing her warmly towards him: and, for the time being, even the incomparable Venetia Trelawney was forgotten by the royal voluptuary. "But what were you going to observe?—that after your marriage——"

"I was cut out, as it were, from that society in which alone I was likely to meet your Royal Highness——"

"Do not *Royal Highness* me," murmured the Prince. "Let me be *George* or anything else you like to *you*."

"Dear, dear George," said Ernestina, pressing her lips to his own. "But I will not weary you with a long story. You are aware that Dysart killed Sefton in a duel——"

"And he was condemned to death yesterday," exclaimed the Prince. "But what was that paper which I signed——"

"Here it is—read it, George," interrupted the lady, producing the document from beneath the cushion of a sofa, and displaying it to the view of his Royal Highness.

The Prince, suffering his curiosity to distract him for a few moments from his dream of voluptuous bliss, took the paper and read it. But when he found that it was in fact an acknowledgment on his part of a criminal correspondence with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and a solemn undertaking to grant a free pardon to her husband, whatever sentence a criminal tribunal might pass upon him,—a feeling of indignation sprang up in his soul—and turning his eyes reproachfully upon his fair companion, he said, "And you were a party to this precious document?"

"Hear me, Prince—hear me, dearest George—and do not prejudge me!" she exclaimed, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses, and immediately bringing all the wanton witcheries of seductive artifice to play their artillery upon him again.

"But let us first destroy this paper, my love," said the Prince: "that is, if you really have any regard and affection for me."

"Destroy it if you will," observed Ernestina, her manner suddenly changing into coldness "but in that case I shall be ruined, and you will be exposed."

"What mean you? Speak!" cried the Prince.

"If the paper be destroyed, Dysart will proclaim to the world all that occurred at Beechey Manor," responded the lady. "Thus my reputation will be wrecked—and your's will sustain no advantage."

"But do you wish me to comply with the guarantee contained in this document?" demanded the bewildered Prince: "do you wish me to exercise my prerogative as Regent and grant a free pardon to your husband? I thought you said just now that you hated, loathed, and abhorred him——"

"And I repeat those expressions now," exclaimed Ernestina. "Yes—I hate, loath, and abhor him: and it is precisely because I wish to leave him to his doom, that I enjoin you not to destroy that paper, but on the contrary help me in deluding and beguiling the wretched man to the very last. By so doing, he will retain our secret—he will not be goaded by rage or despair to proclaim it to the world—and neither your reputation nor my own need suffer."

"But what purposes have you in view, Ernestina?—and how do you propose to carry out your aims?" asked the Prince, now beginning to comprehend the wily lady's meaning.

"Listen attentively," she said, throwing her arms about his neck and drawing him towards her in such a manner that his ear came close to her lips: and then she whispered long and earnestly.

"Yes—it can be managed in that way—and it must be done, so," said the Prince, in a musing tone, when she had ceased speaking. "But have you the nerve—the tact—the courage to carry out the plan to the very last moment?"

"By all the wrongs I have sustained at his hands," returned the lady, in a low voice that was full of concentrated bitterness, "I swear that I am as remorseless in my vengeance as I am capable of being fervid, enthusiastic, and devoted in love."

"I believe you, dearest Ernestina—I believe you," said the Prince, now again melting beneath the influence of her blandishments. "And remember, I trust entirely to you—I confide in you altogether——"

"My love towards you is the proof of my sincerity," murmured the lady, redoubling the ardour of her caresses and exciting the Prince to tender dalliance.

"Well, let me write what you require upon the margin of that document," he said; "and then, as I ere now observed, we can talk of love—and only of love."

Thus speaking, the Prince rose and placed himself at a table on which there were writing-materials.

"Now dictate to me, my charming preceptress, what I am to say," he observed, taking up a pen and preparing to write.

"Let the annotation run thus," said Ernestina, bending over him, with one arm thrown about his neck:—'*I have re-perused this paper and reiterate the promise made therein.*' Now affix the date and your signature. That will do."

"Well, it is done—and I am glad of it," observed the Prince. "You do not know how I hate trouble of any kind. I was formed and fashioned to spend my existence pleasurably, and not in the routine of business and serious affairs. Come, put away that document, Ernestina—and tell me once more that you are really and truly very fond of me."

The lady locked up the paper in the drawer of a *chiffonier* standing in one of the window recesses, and then took her seat upon a sofa, the Prince placing himself by her side. At the same instant his looks fell upon the door communicating with the mysterious suite of apartments: and, as a train of recollections associated therewith gushed through his memory, he said, "Ernestina my darling, have you ever been in those rooms?"

"Never," she replied. "They are my uncle's private apartments—and he does not allow any one save his valet Stephen Brockman and the housekeeper to enter them."

"And have you never been inspired with curiosity sufficient to induce you to explore those

forbidden regions?" asked the royal voluptuary, now seized with an ardent longing to witness the effect of the gallery's contents upon Ernestina, whose passions he hoped to see flame up to a maddening pitch.

"To speak candidly," she replied, "I *have* wished to penetrate into the secrets of those apartments: but I have never found an opportunity. The door has always been locked——"

"Ah! you little vixen," exclaimed the Prince, patting her cheek; "you have tried the door, then?"

"Do you not know that woman's curiosity is as great as her capacity for love?" said Ernestina, laughing. "But have you ever visited those apartments—you, who are so intimate with my uncle?"

"I have, dearest Ernestina," responded the Prince: "and I can assure you that they contain the choicest specimens of statuary and painting. Ah! how I should rejoice to become your guide there!"

"It is impossible," said Ernestina, rising from the sofa and trying the door. "You perceive it is locked—and I dare not ask Brockman for the keys, even if my uncle had left them in his possession," she added, returning to her seat.

"Are you not aware that there is a secret entrance from the dressing-room of the Marquis?" inquired the Prince: then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, "But of course you are not—otherwise you would long ago have obtained access to the apartments by that means of communication."

"No doubt," exclaimed Ernestina, laughing, and displaying the rows of pearl which embellished her mouth. "I will not affect a virtue which I do not possess: and now that you have raised my curiosity, you shall indeed become my guide and companion in a visit to those rooms. But wait an instant, while I assure myself that the coast is clear."

Thus speaking, the lady again started from her seat by the Prince's side, and went to look forth upon the landing. No one was there—and she beckoned his Royal Highness to follow hastily. He at once obeyed—and they passed together into her uncle's bed-chamber. This they traversed and entered the dressing-room: but Ernestina saw no trace of a door in the wall which separated that dressing-room from the private suite of apartments.

"You are more puzzled than if you were wildered in the maze at Hampton Court," cried the Prince, laughing: then, having pressed his lips upon her fair shoulder as he threw his arm for a moment round her waist, he said, "Look here."

Thus speaking, he pressed his thumb upon a particular spot on the paper—and a door immediately flew open. Bounding past the Prince, Ernestina sped into the room thus revealed to her: but a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from her lips, as her eyes encountered the never-to-be-forgotten face of Daniel Coffin the Hangman.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE PRISONER IN THE CHAIR.

At that ejaculation of terror, the Prince sprang forward from the dressing-room, just in time to catch Lady Ernestina Dysart in his arms as she was recoiling from the hideous spectacle of that man whom she never saw nor thought of without associating him with the ghastly horrors of death and the grave: for the incidents of the night at the Blackheath villa were impressed on her brain as indelibly as if seared there with a red-hot iron.

"Who the devil is this fellow?" exclaimed the Prince, the moment his looks lighted upon the Hangman: but the next instant he burst out into such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that all Ernestina's terror vanished, and she glanced again towards the object of her aversion in order to discover the cause of her royal companion's sudden jocularity.

And now she saw what she had not at first perceived—namely, the ignominious as well as ludicrous manner in which Daniel Coffin was held captive in the chair: and a smile wavered upon her beauteous lips, despite the abhorrence and loathing which she entertained for that man. The whole truth flashed to her comprehension in a moment: for she was not so innocent nor so inexperienced as to remain long in doubt as to the real uses which that treacherous chair was intended to serve:—and it likewise struck her that the Hangman, instead of leaving the house on the preceding evening, had stolen up into this suite of apartments and had fallen into a trap which her precious uncle was wont to set for a fairer and lovelier prey than that which it had now caught.

On his side, the Hangman had instantaneously recognised the Prince Regent, whose person was no stranger to him: and, momentarily aghast with dismay, the wretch sate glaring wildly on his Royal Highness. But speedily recovering his wonted presence of mind—especially when he saw that the Prince treated the affair as such a capital joke—he growled forth, "Well, can't you release a poor devil? I have been fast here ever since ten o'clock last night!"

"Oh! the fellow will kill me—positively kill me with laughing!" cried the Prince, actually writhing with paroxysms of mirth as he leant against the wall for support, while the tears streamed down his cheeks now purple from the same cause. "Oh! this is too good—too rich! Ernestina, why don't you enjoy it as I do?"

"Enjoy it, by goles!" growled the Hangman, savagely. "I don't think your Royal Highness would enjoy it very much either! It's no joke to pass a night locked up in an infernal chair that is worse than the stocks, barring the pelting of the rotten eggs."

"Well, I never laughed so much in all my life!" exclaimed the Prince, the humorous fit now gradually subsiding: then, as he closed the door opening from the dressing-room, he said, "Ernestina, do you know our captive friend here? I can't congratulate him upon the pleasantness of his aspect—and if men's countenances were to be taken as bail, I am very sure his would never be accepted."

"No—I am quite ignorant who he is," said Lady Dysart, making Coffin a sapid sign not to contradict the assertion thus boldly ventured. "But I dare say he has found his way into the house on some love-adventure with one of the female-servants," she added, thus furnishing him with a ready excuse to account for his presence there.

"Egad, ma'am, you're quite right," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "It was just as you say—and the girl deluded me into this place where she very politely asked me to be seated—and lo and behold! I was lumbered and limboed in a jiffey. But I'll be even with her yet, the hussey! Only, I hope you won't make no noise about it."

"Rest assured on that head," Ernestina hastened to reply. "But on your part, you will never betray what you have experienced or seen within these walls?"

"I don't want to be laughed at for a fool, ma'am," responded Coffin; "and therefore I shall keep a still tongue in my head. But pray release me."

"In a moment—all in good time!" exclaimed the Prince, still with a smile upon his countenance as he surveyed the man who cut such a piteous figure with his looks made haggard by a night of restlessness and whose aspect was not improved by his matted hair and unshaven chin. "Now, is it really possible," continued his Royal Highness, "that any girl in the service of Lord Leveson took a fancy to so singular a gentleman as you are?"

"She pretended to, at all events," replied Coffin: "but don't you see, it was only to amuse herself by enticing me into this trap."

"And right well must she have been amused, too," rejoined the Prince, still with a bantering tone. "But do you know, my good fellow, that if any one asked me seriously and solemnly to guess who you are, I could not possibly fall back upon any other hypothesis than that you are Jack Ketch."

"And by Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, with another grim smile, "your Royal Highness wouldn't be far short of the mark—and that's plain enough!"

"Heavens! don't talk so horribly," cried Ernestina, becoming very pale.

"Well, ma'am," continued Coffin, "the Prince wants to know who I am—and as I am very certain he won't betray me, I tell him candidly and openly that I *am*—or at least *was*—Jack Ketch, until that cursed affair down at Mrs. Owen's——"

"Ah! is this possible?" ejaculated the Prince, who at first thought the fellow was joking when he acknowledged himself to be the Public Executioner: and the countenance of his Royal Highness now became suddenly stern and severe.

"Let us liberate him and send him about his business," said Ernestina, catching the Prince by the arm and gazing on him with a look of entreaty.

"Yes—and the sooner he gets out of my sight, the better," exclaimed George. "But, no!" he suddenly ejaculated, as a thought flashed to his mind. "This fellow may be of service to us," he added, in a musing tone: then, drawing Ernestina to the farther end of the room, he said in a low whisper, "With this scoundrel's co-operation, our plans relative to Dysart would be made secure and safe enough!"

"I at once fathom your meaning," responded the lady, likewise lowering her voice to a scarcely audible whisper: "but would you trust him?"

"And why not?" asked the Prince. "He would not dare betray us, because he must know full well that not a human being would believe him, and that he would be treated as a Bedlamite. Besides, gold purchases the secrecy even of such ruffians as this——"

"True! But he is no longer the agent of the law—he has ceased to occupy his loathsome office," observed the lady. "For, if I be not mistaken, he is the wretch who shot Mrs. Owen's footman—and therefore he himself has become amenable to the law."

"Ah! I did not think of *that* at the moment," said the Prince. "But at all events, let us question the villain and ascertain what his position and prospects really are. One never knows what loopholes such scoundrels have to creep out of. In any case there is no harm in questioning him: it will only be at the expense of remaining a few minutes longer in his precious company."

With this resolve the Prince turned again towards the Hangman, who had awaited in some degree of suspense the result of the whispered colloquy between his Royal Highness and Ernestina. As for the lady herself, it was with evident reluctance that she again accosted the Hangman: nor did she much admire the prospect of falling even more deeply into that ruffian's power than she already was.

"Now tell me," said the Prince, leaning against the secret door of the dressing-room, and fixing his eyes searchingly upon the Hangman, "what prospect you have of ever getting out of the scrape into which your crimes have plunged you."

"First tell me," exclaimed Coffin, "what motive you have in asking."

"No unfriendly one," replied the Prince. "You are well aware that it does not suit my purpose to hand you over to the grasp of justice: *that* calculation you have already revolved in your mind—and therefore you need no assurances from my lips upon the point. But I have a particular reason for wishing to know whether you entertain any hopes of being shortly restored to the very pleasant and agreeable office which you are compelled, it appears, temporarily to vacate."

"Does your Royal Highness mean the post of Jack Ketch?" inquired Coffin, more and more amazed at the turn the conversation was taking.

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed the Prince. "Come—speak out, man: you *know* I can't—or rather won't do you any harm—whereas," he added, more deliberately, "I may do you some good."

"Ah! that's different," said Coffin, his looks now brightening up. "Well, my lord—or Royal Highness—I'll explain to you exactly the predicament I stand in. You see I'm now playing at hide-and-seek—afraid to go near my own house——"

"And therefore you take up your quarters in other people's," added the Prince, drily. "But go on. I suppose you are afraid of being arrested?"

"Just so," observed the Hangman: "and there is but two chances of my ever being comfortable again. One is the death of my sworn enemy, Larry Sampson——"

"That is the famous Bow Street officer—eh?" said the Prince.

"Lor', how your Royal Highness does know

everything!" exclaimed Coffin. "One would really think you'd been a gonnoff or cracksman* yourself in your day—and perhaps you would too, if you hadn't been born a Prince."

"Well, go on," said his Royal Highness, who could not help smiling at the conceit. "You have told me one of your chances of getting what you call comfortable again: now tell me the other."

"It is just this," rejoined Daniel Coffin,—"that if so be there's a man to hang some fine Monday morning, and no one to hang him, the sheriff will make proclamation of free pardon to any enterprising individual, no matter what his crimes may have been, who shall step for'ard and offer himself for the dooty."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Prince, with a rapid glance of intelligence at Ernestina. "Then you really do expect that sooner or later you may resume your favourite post——"

"If it wasn't an unpleasant subject, Prince," said the Hangman, looking towards the lady in a meaning manner, "I might perhaps let you into the real secret of my hopes on the point we are discussing."

"Do not mind me," observed Ernestina. "Speak candidly and openly to his Royal Highness, whatever you may have to say:"—and she walked towards the end of the room, still however remaining within ear-shot, as the chamber has already been described as of narrow dimensions.

"Well, then, since I am to speak out, I will," continued Daniel Coffin, fully convinced in his own mind that all this questioning did not arise from mere curiosity alone on the part of the Prince, but was connected with the topic of his recently-whispered colloquy with Ernestina, whatever that topic might have been. "The fact is, your Royal

* Thief or burglar.

Highness, Mr. Dysart will have to figure at Tuck-up Fair next Monday week, if so be your Royal Highness doesn't mean to let him off. And somehow or another a little bird whispers in my ears that you *won't* let him off——"

"Ah!" cried the Prince—and the ejaculation was echoed, but in a lower tone, by Lady Ernestina Dysart. "What makes you assume *that*, fellow?" he demanded sternly.

"Oh! simply because I see your Royal Highness and her ladyship on such very comfortable terms together," replied the Hangman,—"coming into this pleasant range of apartments, for instance—very likely to take a peep into yonder gallery—and at all events whispering together, exchanging sly glances, and seeming on such capital terms that a husband is better out of the way in such a case."

As Coffin thus spoke, Ernestina turned aside her countenance that was crimsoning with mingled indignation and shame: but it did not strike her that it was her own fault if the ruffian thus were enabled to allude with coarse flippancy to her amour with the Prince. As for her royal paramour himself, he was for a moment inclined to give way to his anger at the fellow's remarks: but perceiving that any display of wrath would be alike useless and ridiculous, he bit his lip and held his peace.

"So you observe," continued the Hangman, "that I'm rather a far-seeing covey after my own fashion: and to return to what I was saying, I'm now in hope that, if so be Mr. Dysart should be tucked up next Monday week, I may have the opportunity of getting a free pardon and going home all comfortable again to my crib in Fleet Lane, where I shall be happy to shave your Royal Highness any day for nothing."

"And such is your hope," said the Prince, in a musing tone: "and you expect it will be gratified on Monday week. Now, can you keep a secret?—and do you want to earn a couple of hundred guineas?"

"Yes, to both questions," replied the Hangman, joyfully.

"Ernestina," said the Prince, "retire into that room, and close the door. I would rather speak to this man alone. It must only be painful to your feelings," he added, in a whisper, as he conducted the lady into the luxuriously furnished apartment which has already been described as forming the first of the suite.

Ernestina accordingly remained in this room while the Prince concluded his discourse with Daniel Coffin. What farther passed between them, we need not now relate: suffice it to say that having been closetted alone with the Hangman for upwards of ten minutes, his Royal Highness returned to the lady in the apartment to which he had conducted her.

"Well, my angel, it is all right," he said, in a low mysterious tone, as he closed the door behind him. "The fellow has entered into my views—and I am glad that the thought struck me."

"But where is he?—have you released him from the chair?—is he gone?" demanded Ernestina, trembling with the excitement into which the prolonged train of incidents had thrown her.

"The rascal could not very well leave the house in broad day-light," said the Prince,—"to be stopped by your servants as a prowling robber, or to be snapped up by some constable or informer in the streets. No—he must remain here until dusk. I have liberated him from the chair—and he is busy in devouring a quantity of biscuits with which his pocket is crammed. But you look pale—ill——"

"I shall be better presently, my dearest George," answered Ernestina, with a fond look. "But let us leave these apartments and return to the Drawing-room. We have already been too long away—and if any of the servants should have entered during our absence, what must they have thought?"

"That I know how to appreciate the beauties of an angel!" replied the Prince, caressing her. "We will return to the Drawing-room since you desire it: but we must retrace our way through your uncle's chambers——"

"By what means did that dreadful man obtain access to these rooms, I wonder?" said Ernestina, the thought now striking her for the first time.

"By aid of a skeleton-key, he tells me," answered the Prince: "and I have no doubt his intention was to rob the house. But we will not trouble ourselves any more about him: he will be useful to us—and that is sufficient. Come—let us retrace our way to the Drawing-room."

The Prince accordingly led Ernestina back into the adjoining apartment, where the Hangman was now walking to and fro to stretch his limbs, which were horribly cramped by his long prisonage in the treacherous chair. Opening the secret door by pressing his hand on one of the roses that formed the pattern of the paper, his Royal Highness and Ernestina once more gained the dressing-room. The secret door was carefully closed again; and from the dressing-room they passed into the bed-chamber.

But, to tell the truth, they paused there awhile: and nearly another half-hour elapsed ere they returned into the Crimson Drawing-room. Then the lady's cheeks were flushed and her eyes swam in a softly sensuous languor—while the countenance of the Prince was radiant with satisfaction and triumph. Alas! Venetia was still forgotten by the royal voluptuary!

"Farewell for the present, my charmer," he said, straining Ernestina to his breast. "We shall soon meet again—the sooner the better!"

"*That* depends entirely on yourself, my dear George," whispered the lady, in her soft musical tones and with a look that was in itself a whole world of blandishments.

The Prince now took his departure—and Ernestina, having ordered the carriage, ascended to her own chamber to dress for going out.

CHAPTER LXIII.

NEWGATE.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, as a beautiful girl, seventeen years of age and neatly though plainly dressed, reached the visitors' gate at Newgate. Her countenance was pale as marble—her eyes were somewhat red with weeping—and the nervous quivering of her lips showed how strong and painful were the efforts which she made to crush

and stifle the grief that was swelling so agonisingly in her bosom. Her slight form was modelled to the most graceful symmetry: innocence shed its soft halo even upon her profoundly mournful looks;—her retiring, timid, and bashful manner unmistakably denoted the purity of her mind.

Ascending the steps leading to the gate, or half-door, surmounted with its bristling fringe of iron spikes, her looks plunged affrightedly and recoilingly into the dark gloomy vestibule within: and the next moment a turnkey looked over the well-guarded barrier.

"What is it, young o'oman?" he said, in a short surly tone—for he was discussing his dinner and a pot of porter at the moment of her arrival.

"I believe—I am afraid," she answered tremulously and timidly, "that a young gentleman named Theodore Varian has been brought hither this forenoon——"

"We've no young genelmen here, Miss," said the turnkey, gruffly. "A young *man* has been brought in this mornin', committed by the Lord Mayor for trial——"

"May I see him?" asked the girl, the syllables which formed the request seeming as if they issued from a breaking heart. "He is my brother:"—and she burst into tears.

"Well, I'm sorry to be obleeged to refuse you, my dear," said the turnkey, somewhat softened: "but it's after the 'ours for visitors, and its agin the rules to let anybody enter now. I'm wery sorry, I say—but you must come to-morrow mornin' at eleven o'clock."

"Oh! can you not let me see my poor brother—if only for a moment?" asked Ariadne Varian, in a voice that was convulsed with bitter, bitter anguish.

"It can't be done, Miss," said the turnkey: "but you can ax the guv'nor. Go on a little further, and ascend them steps which leads to the door of his house."

Then, having waved a huge key in the direction to which he had alluded, the man disappeared from the gate—and poor Ariadne, hastily wiping her eyes, passed along the front of the frowning prison until she reached the door of the governor's dwelling. The knock which she gave was low and timid—for there was in her soul a sense of such deep, deep humiliation, that it seemed to her as if her prayer would only be granted by a display of abject servility on her part, and that even too loud a knock would ensure a refusal. Alas! this poor young girl was already doomed, at so tender an age, to experience the degradation which even innocence feels when visiting the abode of the criminal!

A woman-servant answered the door—and the instant Ariadne began to make known her business, the governor himself issued forth from an office close by.

"I'm sorry I can't help you, young woman," he said: "but it is altogether against the rules to admit a visitor after the proper hours. It is more than I dare do. You must come to-morrow morning. But what case is it?"

"I am the sister of Theodore Varian, sir," replied Ariadne, again bursting into tears, and leaning against the entrance for support.

"Ah! I recollect," cried the governor. "Committed just now from the Mansion House—eh? Embezzlement and fraud—my friend Emmerson the prosecutor? Ah! young woman, it is a bad case: your brother should have known better. There, now—don't cry like this—people will think I am ill-using you, perhaps. Come to-morrow at eleven."

With these words the governor closed the door of his house—and Ariadne turned slowly away from the prison, weeping as if her heart would break.

A few minutes afterwards a carriage dashed up to the governor's dwelling; and a livery servant, leaping down from behind, gave a long thundering knock which raised every echo in the Old Bailey. The front-door was thrown open — the governor himself rushed down the steps—and, assisting Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight, he conducted her with the profoundest manifestations of respect into his own drawing-room.

"I wish to see my unhappy husband," said the lady, assuming an air of intense affliction.

"Well, your ladyship, it is a *leetle* after the usual hours," observed the governor, with his blandest tone and utmost suavity of manner: "but of course I could not for a moment think of enforcing the gaol-regulations in respect to your ladyship. Will your ladyship see Mr. Dysart in this apartment?"

"No, sir, I thank you," responded Ernestina. "It is in the gloom and dreariness of his own cell that he requires consolation—and thither I shall trouble you to conduct me. But I may as well inform you," she added, with a mysterious look, "that I cherish every hope of obtaining a reprieve and a pardon for my unfortunate husband."

"I am delighted to hear it, my lady," exclaimed the governor. "It is indeed an affair demanding the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy," added this gentleman who a few minutes before had pronounced Varian's case to be so very black. "Is there anything I can do to cheer Mr. Dysart's spirits—anything your ladyship can suggest?"

"I thank you most sincerely," answered Ernestina, with a smile so gracious and condescending that it quite ravished the governor, who was one of those persons that consider the favour of aristocracy to be an inestimable benefit, and who would sooner lose their ears or their eyes than incur the displeasure of this said aristocracy. "Yes—I think you can do something to cheer poor Dysart," continued the lady: "and I shall not forget to mention your kindness in terms of gratitude to my uncle the Marquis of Leveson."

"What can I do to oblige your ladyship?" asked the governor, now lifted up to the seventh heaven of delight.

"You may cheer my poor husband's spirits from time to time by assuring him that he is certain of a reprieve and eventual pardon," continued Lady Ernestina Dysart. "He will be more tranquillised and more confident by receiving such assurances from your lips, because he may fancy that when coming from me they are rather the expression of what I hope and desire than what I am certain of. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, my lady," replied the obsequious governor. "I will seek every opportunity to visit Mr. Dysart for a few moments, and will hint my conviction that he has nothing to apprehend, but everything to hope."

"You may do this with the greatest confidence, I can assure you," said Ernestina, inwardly rejoicing at the ease with which the man's sycophancy made him her tool in the matter: then, appa-

rently in quite a casual way, she observed, "I can only say, my dear sir, that Lord Leveson will always be most happy to see you in Albemarle Street, and that henceforth no guest will be received at his table with a more cordial welcome than yourself."

The governor was now so enchanted that he knew not whether he was standing upon his head or his heels; and he literally confounded himself in bowings and scrapings. Ernestina rose from the chair which she had taken on entering the room; and the obsequious governor forthwith conducted her to the cell in which her husband was confined. He then withdrew—and Ernestina remained alone in the company of Paul Dysart.

"What intelligence have you for me?" he demanded with breathless impatience.

"Good," she replied: then taking from about her person a document which her husband instantaneously recognised, she pointed to some writing on the margin, saying "Read this!"

Dysart's looks at once settled with all the avidity of suspense upon the writing thus indicated; and when he beheld that solemn recognition of the pledge contained in the document, with the Prince's signature affixed thereto, he exclaimed in a joyous tone, "Thank heaven! I am saved!"

"Yes—you have now nothing to dread, Paul," said Ernestina, appearing to participate in his enthusiastic delight. "The Prince was with me for an hour this morning—and he did not hesitate to pen of his own accord that annotation on the margin of the paper. But he nevertheless feels that the matter is a delicate one, and must be managed with tact and judgment, so as to prevent the public mind from being outraged by a leniency which is not warranted by the circumstances. These are the Prince's own words: and he has accordingly hit upon a plan——"

"And that plan?" exclaimed Dysart, impatiently.

"I will explain it to you," said Ernestina, with a winning air of apparent sincerity, all the more deeply simulated in proportion to the ticklish nature of the ground upon which she was touching. "The Prince's idea is that things must be left to take their usual course until the very last moment——"

"Ah! I understand you," interrupted Dysart, becoming ghastly pale. "He means to treat me like one of those common malefactors who are made to ascend even the very platform of the scaffold before the reprieve is produced!"

"Do not be impatient—and do not give way to passionate feelings," said Ernestina, as she again secured the document about her person. "The Prince has desired me to submit two alternatives to your consideration. The first is that you receive a respite at once, and this to be followed by a commutation of the sentence to three years' imprisonment in Newgate: the other is that you receive the respite on the scaffold, and this to be followed by a free pardon within a day or two. In either case appearances will be saved, and the public will have no room to suspect that any private influences or intrigues of an extraordinary nature have been brought to bear upon the mind of the Prince Regent."

"Yes—I see the difficulty in which he is placed," said Dysart; "and I was not altogether unprepared for something of this sort. Well, the alternatives do not require a moment's reflection: I accept the latter, as being the shortest though the most painful ordeal. As for remaining cooped up in this infernal prison for three years, I'd sooner be hanged straight off at once. And, after all there's no great harm in mounting the steps of a gibbet when one knows that the sheriff has got the reprieve in his pocket."

"This is the course I should have recommended, had you asked my advice," said Ernestina: "because in ten days all will be over, and you will be free again."

"And then we will return to the Continent, or go anywhere you like," observed Dysart, anxious to show a conciliatory spirit towards his wife, for he more than suspected that the Prince had exacted from her certain favours as the reward of the acknowledgment written on the margin of the document. "What do you say, Ernestina?"

"Oh! by all means let us repair to France, at least for a time!" she exclaimed, appearing to catch with avidity at the proposal. "You have plenty of ready money in your possession—and I shall manage to get a thousand or two from my uncle."

"So much the better. By the bye, what did the Prince say when he found that the heroine of his midnight adventure and Lady Ernestina Dysart were one and the same person?"

"If I told you that he was very sorry to meet me again, I should deceive you, Paul," she responded, with an arch look. "Personally, I hate and detest him—but I was prepared to make any sacrifice for your sake. However, do not let us talk upon that subject. You must now keep up your spirits as well as you can——"

"Oh! I shall be happy enough, my dear," exclaimed her husband. "Are you to see the Prince again shortly?"

"Yes—in a day or two," she replied. "He made me promise——"

"That's right!" observed Dysart. "Stick close to him. Not that he can possibly fly from his word——"

"He would not have ratified the document if such had been his intention," Ernestina hastened to answer. "But I can tell you something more, Paul——"

"What is it?" he demanded eagerly.

"The Prince has promised that a private intimation shall be sent to the governor to the effect that the extreme sentence of the law is not to be carried out in your case: and his object in doing this is that the governor himself may give you a secret assurance of your eventual safety."

"Ah! now the last remaining scintillation of uneasiness has become extinguished in my mind!" exclaimed Dysart, rubbing his hands joyously. "Upon my word, my dear Ernestina, you have managed all this admirably—and my future conduct shall show my gratitude towards you."

The lady embraced her husband, and then took her departure. Returning to the governor's room, she again thanked this functionary for his courtesy and kindness; and entering the carriage, drove home to Albemarle Street, rejoicing at the success of her interview with Dysart and the security of mind into which she had so completely but so artfully lulled him.

In the course of the afternoon the governor visited the prisoner's cell; and having inquired with all possible respect and courtesy after his health, he said, "I think, Mr. Dysart, that I shall not exceed the bounds of duty by dropping a hint that may serve to tranquillise your mind."

"You are very good, my dear sir," exclaimed the prisoner. "And this hint——"

"Is to the effect that you need not apprehend a very severe carrying out of the law," responded the governor, with a knowing look. "The fact is, sir, I am a little in the confidence of certain persons high in authority——"

"Ah! I understand," said Dysart, seeing in this mysterious hint on the governor's part the realization of the announcement made to him by his wife. "It has been whispered to you that a reprieve and pardon may be confidently relied upon!"

"Hush!" observed the governor, placing his finger to his lip in a meaning manner.

"Say no more!" exclaimed Dysart, joyfully. "I understand you, sir."

"But not a word to the turnkeys—not a word even to your friends," said the governor; "for this is of the nature of a State secret, Mr. Dysart—and if I have ventured to drop a hint, it is because I do not like to see you linger in suspense."

Thus speaking, the governor withdrew—and Mr. Paul Dysart sate down to his dinner as pleasantly and as comfortably as if his pardon had already been proclaimed to the world.

Meantime Lady Ernestina had returned home to Albemarle Street: and *she* also enjoyed her dinner that day with as much zest as her husband experienced in Newgate. At about nine o'clock in the evening Mr. Lawrence Sampson was announced; and the lady received him with her wonted affability.

"Sit down, Mr. Sampson," she said, with a gracious stoop from the pedestal of her aristocratic hauteur,—"and take a glass of wine. I have seen my poor husband to-day, and broke to his ears the matter which you mentioned to me last evening. I assured him that if he had really indulged in any love-affair or amorous intrigue unknown to me, I would freely and cordially forgive him; and I besought him to tell me the truth for the sake of Mr. Malvern, who was inconsolable on account of his father's still unexplained and unaccountable disappearance. But Mr. Dysart assured me that he had no reason to suspect any female of treachery towards him. I then showed him the anonymous letter which had given the information leading to his arrest—but he did not recognise the handwriting. His manner corroborated his words. I have therefore done all I could for you in the affair, Mr. Sampson—and in one sense I am sorry that the result is not more favourable to Mr. Malvern's hopes of discovering a clue to his father's fate; while, on the other hand, I rejoice that my husband has proved guiltless of any unworthy treatment calculated to evoke a female's vengeance."

"I thank your ladyship for the trouble you have taken in the matter," said the officer. "Would you have the kindness to give me back the anonymous letter? It may serve on some future occasion——"

"I have locked it up in my writing-desk, Mr. Sampson," observed the lady, with the most perfect self-possession, although, as the reader will recollect, she had consigned the document to the flames: "but the desk is up-stairs in the drawing-room, and I will fetch you the note," she added, rising from her seat.

"I could not think of giving your ladyship so much trouble," exclaimed Sampson. "Perhaps you will have the goodness to remit the letter to me by post at your ladyship's convenience?"

"Most assuredly, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina: then, so soon as Larry had taken his leave, she murmured to herself, "Ah! even the cunning Bow Street officer is made a dupe by me!"

Lounging in an arm-chair drawn near the fire in the dining-room, Ernestina sate meditating upon her various schemes and plots until past eleven o'clock: then, so soon as the domestics had retired for the night, she proceeded to assist Mr. Daniel Coffin in taking his departure from the mansion. Entering her uncle's dressing-room, she opened the door by means of the secret spring; and the Hangman instantaneously came forth from the apartment which was furnished with the luxurious sofas, he having experienced no inclination to entrust himself again to either of the arm-chairs in the central room of the suite.

Guided by Ernestina, Coffin descended the stairs on tip-toe—and when they reached the hall, he said in a low tone and with a cunning leer, "Ah! my lady, your friend the Prince is a precious rum customer. He's down to a dodge or two, he is!"

"But he pays well those who serve him," replied Ernestina, with a look of deep meaning: "and he is remorseless in his vengeance against those who deceive him."

"I shall be one of them that he pays well, ma'am," answered Coffin.

He then stole out of the house;—and Ernestina, infinitely relieved by the departure of a man whose looks always produced upon her the impression of a hideous reptile's gaze, tripped up-stairs to her own chamber.

But as she passed the door of her uncle's room, she was seized with a sudden inclination to return into the mysterious suite of apartments and explore them fully. The deep silence that prevailed through the mansion, struck however ominously to her soul: and, continuing her way to her own room, she decided upon postponing the gratification of her curiosity until another occasion.

CHAPTER LXIV.

A CHAPTER TO WHICH WE CAN GIVE NO TITLE.

It was nine o'clock on the Monday evening which Venetia had named for her appointment with the Prince Regent; and his Royal Highness sate alone in a small but sumptuously-furnished room at Carlton House. A side-door communicated with a bed-chamber, which was fitted up with even a surpassing luxury: but that door was closed for the present.

The Prince reclined upon a sofa in the first-mentioned apartment; and he was giving free rein to all the voluptuous thoughts which the image of Venetia could not fail to conjure up in his easily excitable imagination. Within reach of his hand stood a table spread with wines of many exquisite

descriptions and a choice dessert: a cheerful fire blazed in the grate;—the heavy hangings were drawn over the windows—and the atmosphere was warm and perfumed. A lustre suspended to the ceiling diffused a rich and mellow light through the room; and the general aspect of luxurious comfort was enhanced by the velvet drapery which covered the doors—as if not even the faintest thrill of a wintry air should be allowed to penetrate thither!

We said that the Prince was yielding himself up to the pleasures of imagination, as a meet and provocative prelude to the more real joys that were to come. For he had no doubt as to Venetia's keeping her appointment, inasmuch as she had written him a note in the morning reiterating in her own beautiful calligraphy the hurried promise she had made on the evening of the banquet at Colonel Malpas's house.

As he thus reclined upon the sofa, confident in the sincerity of his expected charmer, the Prince insensibly found himself entering into a comparison between her beauty and that of every other lovely female who had submitted to his embraces. Their number was legion, it was true: but still in a rapid survey did he glance at them all—not forgetting Octavia Clarendon, Mrs. Fitzherbert, Lady Letitia Lade, Mrs. Brace the milliner, the Countess of Jersey, and the Duchess of Devonshire;—and he came at length to the conclusion that none was to be compared with Venetia! Nor in this mental review of his almost countless conquests amongst beauties of all grades and ranks—from the Duchess to the milliner, from the Countess to the ballet-dancer, and from the haughtiest dame to the humblest servant-girl,—nor in this category, we say, did he forget to include Miss Bathurst, Agatha Owen, and Lady Ernestina Dysart. He remembered that the first-named had once been eminently beautiful: his mind still retained pleasurable impressions of his amour with Agatha:—but chiefly did his fancy gloat over the superb and voluptuous charms of the impassioned Ernestina. Between this lady, then, and Venetia did he hover in a few moments' uncertainty; his memory comparing their respective charms—the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Ernestina, with the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Venetia: but at length, as above stated, he gave his decision in favour of the latter. Yes—for about Venetia there was all the first freshness of youth—the bloom upon the peach that has scarcely come in contact with the rude hand of man!

And now, as the image of the beauteous creature had become paramount in his mind, to the exclusion of all the rest, he felt his impatience for her arrival augmenting every instant. He looked at his watch: it was ten minutes past nine—was she not coming? Yes: for scarcely had he asked himself the question, when the door opened from the landing without—the velvet drapery was pushed aside—and Venetia was ushered into his presence. The curtain fell again—the domestic who had escorted her thither, closed the door behind her—and the Prince Regent sprang forward to clasp her in his arms.

Venetia had made her appearance closely veiled and enveloped in an ample cloak, so as to avoid being recognised by the Prince's servants: but she now hastily threw off her bonnet and veil—dropped her cloak—and fell in all the grandeur of her beauty into the outstretched arms of her royal lover.

"Oh! how magnificent you look!" murmured the enraptured Prince, as he conducted her to a seat after fondly and fervidly embracing her: then, placing himself by her side, he contemplated her with the earnest looks of a devouring sensuousness.

As the light shone upon the beauteous creature, enhancing the brilliancy of her charms into positive radiance, she seemed a being of celestial mould and nature. Her very presence was dazzling and overpowering: for every feature and contour appeared to possess its own light,—the lustre of the eyes, the alabaster of the forehead, the vivid redness of the lips, the snowy whiteness of the neck and bosom, and the auburn glory of the hair!

She was dressed in a crimson velvet robe, with a low boddice fitting tight to her shape—and her arms were naked. The gentle agitation which she experienced had deepened the rich bloom upon her cheeks; and altogether she looked so transcendently lovely that the Prince felt as if he could surrender not only his present rank but also the hope of some day wearing the British crown, rather than resign the certainty of possessing her this night!

"Dearest—ever dear Venetia," he said, passing one arm round her neck, and drawing her gently towards him, "is it indeed possible that the happy moment has arrived for me to enjoy your love?—or am I plunged in a delicious dream which is to know the waking of disappointment?"

"Faithful to my promise, I am here," murmured Venetia, in the melting tones of her sweet limpid voice. "Do you remember all the conditions of our compact?"

"You shall recapitulate them, my angel," replied the Prince: "and there is nothing you can demand to which I shall hesitate to assent."

"First and foremost," said Venetia, "it was agreed that I should marry in order to save my reputation—and I have done so."

"Ah! happy Horace Sackville!" exclaimed the Prince. "But tell me, dearest—was he already engaged to you on that day when we agreed that you should marry?"

"Assuredly not," answered Venetia. "But I was aware that he formed one of the party of six who had leagued, or rather wagered in the love-campaign—I likewise knew that he had seen me often and was inspired with an affection for me—and I consequently felt certain that he would accept my hand in marriage."

"But does he know—is he aware——"

"That I am come hither this evening? Yes: before we were married I explained to him that she whom he took as his wife was pledged to become the mistress of the Prince."

"Truly, he must be infatuated with you, my Venetia! But this is not wonderful—thou art the loveliest woman that ever trod upon the earth!"

"O flatterer!" cried Venetia, with playful remonstrance. "But I have before told you how readily and fluently these compliments glide from your tongue."

"By heaven! they are truths when applied to thee!" exclaimed the Prince, first devouring her with his regards and then covering her face, shoulders, and bosom with frenetic kisses. "But

you were recapitulating the terms of our compact? Go on—and let us finish all details savouring of business, that we may devote ourselves wholly and solely to the enjoyments of love."

"It was agreed," continued Venetia, "that you were to find some office for my husband about your royal person, so that we might have a suite of apartments allotted to us at Carlton House."

"To-morrow Horace Sackville shall receive the appointment of Lord Steward of my household," said the Prince. "The post has been vacant for these last ten days—and I cannot more worthily fill it up than by the nomination of my charming Venetia's husband."

"And the name which I bear was also to be gilded with a peerage," murmured Venetia, now displaying all her most winning seductiveness.

"That condition shall likewise be kept, angel that thou art!" cried the Regent, straining her in his arms. "Hast thou aught more to demand?"

"Nothing," responded Venetia, her countenance radiant with joy and triumph.

"And thou art mine?" said the Prince: "tell me that thou art mine!"

"Yes—I am thine," she murmured, her voice suddenly sinking to a dying tone, as her head drooped upon his shoulder and she fell upon his breast.

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It was still dark, at an early hour in the morning, when Venetia stole forth from the private door of Carlton Palace. She was enveloped in her ample cloak and the thick veil was drawn completely over her countenance, so that not even the most prying eye could discover the brilliant heroine of our tale through that deep disguise.

Hurrying to the nearest hackney-coach stand, she entered a vehicle and ordered the driver to proceed towards Knightsbridge. When within a short distance of Acacia Cottage, she stopped the coach and descended, performing the rest of the way on foot. Immediately upon reaching her home and tapping gently with her hand at the front-door, it was opened by Horace: and passing in, she stole noiselessly up-stairs, followed by her husband.

The moment they were together in their chamber, and Venetia had thrown aside her bonnet and cloak, she flung a rapid and anxious glance upon her husband, by the light of the candle which was burning upon the toilette-table. She saw that his countenance was very pale, but that he endeavoured to subdue the emotion which he felt: and throwing herself into his arms, she gave vent to a violent fit of weeping.

"For heaven's sake, tranquillise yourself, my dearest Venetia," murmured Horace, in a soothing tone as he strained her to his breast. "These sobs will be overheard—the domestics will soon be about in the house, and they will catch the sounds of your grief."

"But do you not now hate—loathe—and despise me?" asked Venetia, suddenly wiping her eyes and gazing anxiously up into his countenance.

"Do you not hate—loathe—and despise *me* for having permitted this?" he inquired, with some degree of bitterness in his tone. "But let us not enter again, and again, and again upon the discussion of a subject on which we have already talked so seriously and so often—and which indeed," he added, "has now proceeded too far to admit of recall!"

"Yes—but has it left no regret behind, Horace?" asked Venetia.

"In one sense, certainly!" he exclaimed. "But the necessity which has ruled us, was almost as inexorable as destiny itself. Indeed, it *was* our destiny—and therefore regret is useless. Rather let us look to the brightest side——"

"Oh! yes—if you really have the heart to do so!" exclaimed Venetia, joyfully. "Well, our ambition will be gratified—our hopes will be realized—and this day's *Gazette* will elevate you to rank and to honour."

"You are to be a Peeress, then, Venetia!" said Horace, caressing her fondly.

"Yes—because you are to become a Peer," she replied.

"And are we to remove to Carlton House?"

"Immediately. The post of Lord Steward is your's."

"Oh! now you will shine as the most brilliant star in the courtly sphere, my charming Venetia!"

"And you will have an opportunity of shining also, my handsome Horace!"

"These are indeed dazzling and brilliant prospects," exclaimed the young man; "and I suppose it is mortal destiny that no ambition can be accomplished without the sacrifice of some of our best feelings."

"But if we do not lose our love for each other, Horace," said Venetia, "may we not be happy—even though our happiness be purchased by my dishonour?"

"We will *make ourselves happy*," observed the husband, emphatically: but still he sighed as he spoke these words, and the forcefulness of his accentuation was only assumed suddenly to drown that sigh.

Venetia sighed also—for she was not so far tainted with depravity, especially after this her *first* fault, as to be otherwise than keenly sensible of the fact that it was now a polluted woman whom her husband was clasping in his arms. They retired to rest—for it was still too early to go down stairs: and Venetia was glad when the candle was extinguished and she could conceal her countenance from the eyes of Horace—for it was suffused with burning blushes.

But they slept—and at a late hour they rose: and now the first feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and even grief had subsided. They began to look their shame more boldly in the face—and the result was that they could soon look at each other also without blushing. The forbidden fruit was plucked and eaten—they had quitted the paradise of nuptial purity—they now knew all their moral nakedness, and speedily ceased to be ashamed. It appeared as if by a mutual but tacit resolve they had suddenly determined to avoid the topic altogether: and they now looked forward to the happiness that was to be derived from brilliancy of position, rather than from the sweet and unimpaired domesticity of the married state.

Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope were staying with Miss Bathurst in Stratton Street: and thus the newly-married pair had no one to observe the changing condition of their minds. The servants were of course ignorant that Venetia had passed

the greater portion of the night away from home: and thus her honour was likewise safe.

In the course of the day two official documents were delivered at Acacia Cottage. One contained the patent elevating Mr. Horace Sackville to the rank of a Baron of the realm, by the style and title of Lord Sackville: the second appointed him to the post of Lord Steward in the household of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

The entire fashionable world was struck with astonishment at these announcements, when they appeared in the *Gazette:* and there was no difficulty in attributing them to the fact that the newly-created nobleman possessed as his wife the most beautiful woman in England. But scandal dared not raise its voice too loud—much less openly point a scornful finger at Lord and Lady Sackville,—inasmuch as the matrimonial gloss was shed upon whatever amount of frailty there might be in the matter. The consequence was that for several days running Acacia Cottage was crowded with visitors who called to congratulate the noble pair, and the Knightsbridge road was thronged with the carriages of what is called the *elite* of the aristocracy hastening thither to pay their court to the new Lord Steward and the Prince's new mistress.

At the end of the week Horace and Venetia removed to the apartments which had been provided for them in Carlton House,—the faithful Jessica, Plumpstead, and the serious-looking footman still remaining in their service.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE GIBBET.

Between nine and ten o'clock on Sunday evening several groups of persons began to collect in the Old Bailey, but chiefly in the wide open space opposite Newgate. During the past week the Recorder had made his report to the Prince Regent relative to the state of the prison; and in that report one individual was named as being under sentence of death. In the case of this person it appeared as if the law was to be allowed to take its course: for a warrant had been issued for his execution—and hence the assembling of the groups of idlers on the eve of the fatal Monday!

The person thus alluded to was Paul Dysart.

Chill and misty was this Sunday evening—dark, sombre, and awe-inspiring was the aspect of Newgate through the deepening gloom. Shivering, ragged, half-starved wretches gathered near the debtor's door, whispering, as they pointed to it, "That's the place the man who's to be hung will come out of to-morrow morning!" Others posted themselves on the very spot close by where the scaffold would be placed, saying in subdued voices, "It is just here that the drop will fall beneath his feet!" Farther on, other groups were collected near the entrance of the press-yard, observing amongst themselves, "The gibbet will be wheeled out of this place!" In fact, there was not a scene, a spot, nor a detail connected with the awful tragedy of a public execution, that escaped comment or explanation on the part of the idlers who were already gathering to the theatre of the forthcoming spectacle.

Soon after ten o'clock on this same Sunday evening a private carriage drove up to the *Saracen's Head* on Snow Hill; and six gentlemen alighted.

"You can come for us to-morrow morning at nine o'clock," said one of the party, addressing himself to the livery-servant in attendance upon the carriage.

"Yes my lord," was the reply.

"What makes you say nine, Curzon?" demanded another of the party. "It will be all over at five minutes past eight."

"But we shall stop to see the body cut down after hanging an hour—eh?" exclaimed the Earl.

"Ah! that's different," observed the other. "I forgot this portion of the ceremony," he added coolly as he whiffed his cigar. "To be sure! we won't miss any act in the Newgate drama."

His companions laughed: and as the carriage drove away, they all entered the coffee room of the *Saracen's Head*, cracking jokes and indulging in a variety of witty sayings and repartees as they traversed the inn-yard.

The party consisted of the Earl of Curzon, who is already well known to our readers,—the Honourable George Macnamara and Lieutenant Apsley, both of whom have been previously mentioned,—Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, a young nobleman who had just come of age and just got into the House of Commons for a pocket-borough in the gift of his father, the Duke of Addlebranes,—the Marquis of Brandyford, a peer of the realm, and who infinitely preferred the excitement of wrenching off knockers to taking part in the prosy debates of the Upper House,—and Count d'Orsayville a foreign adventurer who had worked his way into the very best society, so that he set the fashion for all the male members of the higher class, and was an immense favourite amongst all the ladies of the same sphere. The Count sported a beautiful moustache, was really very handsome, possessed the most fascinating manners, and wore a semi-military cloak the cut of which was the envy of all his male acquaintances.

On entering the coffee-room, this delectable party flung themselves each upon a chair—one yawning, another sprawling out his legs, a third putting *his* legs upon an adjacent table, a fourth laughing heartily at nothing, a fifth uttering an oath by way of amusement (for he had really naught to swear at), and the Earl of Curzon (who made the sixth) ringing the bell so furiously that the wire snapped in twain.

"Now, waiter," said this last-mentioned personage, when the tavern-functionary made his appearance, "we want a private sitting-room for the night."

"Yes, my lord," responded the waiter, to whom the Earl of Curzon was known.

"And no end of whithkey punth," cried Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, who had the misfortune to lisp somewhat—a circumstance which did not disqualify him from becoming a Member of Parliament, because he was a lord.

"And a box of the best cigars, wai-tar!" roared out the Marquis of Brandyford. "Now mind they're good, you unhung scoundrel, you—or, by Jove! I'll punch your head into a jelly for you!"

"And a demn'd good fire bethidth," added Lord Plantagenet. "But don't neglecth the whithkey punth, you pwethiouth wathcal!"

"Vot you call de viskey pohnch vare good—vare good," observed the Count d'Orsayville.

The waiter promised instantaneous compliance with all the instructions he had received; and as he retired from the room the Marquis of Brandyford sent the cushion of a chair spinning after him—but the domestic, who was well on his guard against his lordship's tricks, nimbly avoided the missile. The freak however caused the entire party to laugh immoderately; and Lord Plantagenet Tithtide declared that it was "ekthellenth sporth;" while the Count exclaimed, "Vare good! vare good!"

In the course of half-an-hour the private sitting-room was announced to be in readiness; and thither the aristocratic company repaired, the Marquis of Brandyford tripping up a commercial traveller whom they met upon the stairs, and then gravely apologising to him for the "accidental occurrence." This proceeding excited another burst of uproarious laughter, which was prolonged by the circumstance of the said humorous Marquis kissing an old charwoman of seventy who was clearing away some things upon the landing.

The room to which the waiter escorted the party, was the best in the house: for although the landlord was fully prepared to find everything smashed to pieces in the morning, he was equally aware that his bill for the damage would be liberally paid—and indeed, he was not altogether sorry at the prospect of thus having an opportunity of furnishing that particular apartment anew. A blazing fire roared half-way up the chimney—dessert, wine, and materials for punch were spread upon the table—and a box of cigars likewise greeted the view of the aristocratic convivialists.

"Now we'll make ourselves comfortable till the morning," said the Honourable George Macnamara.

"And I'll brew the punch," exclaimed Lieutenant Apsley, tucking up his coat-sleeves.

"No bwandy nor wum, Apthley, mind!" observed Lord Plantagenet: "only whithkey—and be thure and queeth loth of lemonth."

"I'll be hanged if I'll drink any of your infernal concoctions," vociferated Lord Brandyford. "True to my name, I mean to get as drunk as blazes on brandy."

"Vare good, Markee—vare good!" exclaimed the Count. "You shall have de true English taste. But why for you not have de portare? Wot you call de pot of portare most best for you, Markee, me tink."

"Oh! deuce take the swipes when one means to get jolly," said the Marquis.

"Tho I thay," cried Lord Plantagenet. "You thould wub the lumpth of thugar againth the peel of the lemonth, Apthley. If you don't, you'll not thucktheed in bwewing punth at all dwinkable."

"Leave Apsley to manage it, Tithtide," said the Earl of Curzon. "He always brews for the Guards'-mess—and no one can do it better. I wonder what the devil Dysart is thinking of now. He little suspects that so many of his friends are at hand to see him dance his last fling."

"Vare good! vare good!" ejaculated the Count.

"But if a wepwieve thould come at the lath moment, we thall be mithewably baulked and dithappointed. It would weally be too bad of Dythart to acthept it after all the twouble we've given ourthelvth."

"Dat vare good, milor—vare good!" cried the Count, almost going into ecstacies.

"I saw the Prince yesterday," said Curzon; "and he assured me that, as the jury did not recommend Dysart to mercy, he had no alternative but to allow the law to take its course."

"Oh! if the Pwinth said that," cried Lord Plantagenet, a considerable weight now taken from his mind, "we are all thafe. I never yet thaw an ekthecuthion, and wouldn't mith the pwethent occathion for a thouthand guineath."

"Vare good!" cried the Count. "'Tis de fine old English custom to hang up as many of de English people as de law shall allow——"

"Ah! we beat you, Count, you see," exclaimed the Marquis of Brandyford, "in our public executions. Give me the excitement of one good hanging-scene in preference to all your guillotining."

"Tho I thay," said the lisping nobleman, who was amazingly fond of hearing himself talk. "But I am athtonithed that the influenth of Lady Ernethtina and the Marquith of Levethon did not thucktheed in getting Dythart off."

"The Marquis hates him," said Curzon. "Moreover, he is on the Continent—and I have no doubt he went thither to be out of the way at the present time."

"Well, I cannot say that I ever liked Dysart much," observed Lieutenant Apsley, as he squeezed the lemons into the punch-bowl. "Besides, that affair with young Sefton was a downright murder."

"To be sure," exclaimed the Honourable George Macnamara: "and he deserves to be hanged for it. But, by the bye, we must tell that scoundrel of a waiter not to go to bed all night, as we shall want breakfast at six or seven o'clock in the morning."

"And let us send him to hire a couple of windows for us exactly facing Newgate," suggested the Marquis of Brandyford.

"Yeth—we muth take care and wetain fwont theath to witneth the performanth," cried Lord Plantagenet.

"Vare good—vare good!" exclaimed the Count.

The waiter was accordingly summoned; and having received his instructions in pursuance of the resolves just adopted, he departed at once to secure a couple of windows at some house fronting the prison. In about ten minutes he returned with the gratifying intelligence that he had succeeded in retaining a first-floor room opposite Newgate, for the moderate sum of ten guineas. This bargain was pronounced "dirt cheap" by the aristocratic band of elegants; and the Marquis of Brandyford flung his purse at the waiter's head, bidding him "go and settle for the room, and keep the rest for himself." The purse hit the waiter upon the right eye, which it completely bunged up: but as the use of the left optic still remained, and as the heaviness of the purse convinced the waiter that it contained a tolerable quantity of golden salve, he took the joke with a proportionate amount of good humour.

But leaving the aristocratic party to the enjoyment of their punch, discourse, and practical freaks, we will penetrate into the prison of Newgate and glance at Mr. Dysart in the condemned cell.

It was now eleven o'clock—and the criminal was alone in that dungeon. Upon the little round table stood a cold fowl and a bottle of wine, to which he was paying his respects with all imaginable ease and comfort: for the nearer the hour approached for him to mount the scaffold, the more joyfully did he look forward to it as the term of the ordeal through which he was passing. In plainer terms, he was so well convinced that the reprieve would be produced the moment the halter was affixed to his neck, and that a free pardon would follow as a matter of course in a few days, that he was actually impatient for the hour which would terminate what he now looked upon as mere "bother, excitement, and annoyance."

Ernestina had visited him daily since his condemnation; and on each occasion she had some new proof to offer of the Prince's kind feelings towards him. Moreover, the governor, entirely misled by her representations and obsequiously anxious to oblige her, had given Dysart the most positive assurances that the sheriff would produce the reprieve upon the scaffold. He had even gone so far as to hint the same to the chaplain; and this reverend gentleman, while discussing a bottle of wine with Mr. Dysart in his cell, had reiterated the governor's assurances. Under all these circumstances, therefore, the prisoner entertained no fear as to the result; and while the gathering crowds in the Old Bailey were observing amongst themselves how dreadful his feelings must be, he was comfortably regaling his appetite on a cold capon and an excellent bottle of sherry.

Having partaken of his supper, Dysart undressed and retired to bed, where he speedily fell into a sound sleep. As the night advanced, the multitudes increased outside the gaol; and at five o'clock in the morning the carpenters made their appearance to erect the barrier around the debtor's door, in order to keep back the pressure of the crowds. Despite the noise of their hammers, the criminal slept on!

At six o'clock the platform of the gallows was wheeled out of the press-yard, and stationed on the

verge of the pavement at the debtor's door. The carpenters then proceeded to fix the ladder and erect the huge beams of the gibbet,—all their operations being viewed with intense curiosity and deep interest by the multitude that was swelling in bulk and volume every moment.

From an early hour a black fellow, roughly dressed and carrying a huge club in his hand, had been lurking near the debtor's door: and when the barrier was put up, he elbowed his way to a place as near that door as possible. There he remained fixed like a statue—leaning with his arms upon the barrier, and neither addressing a word to a soul nor appearing to pay any attention to the discourse that was going on in his hearing.

It was seven o'clock in the morning before Dysart awoke from his slumber: and he would perhaps have slept on, had not the entrance of the chaplain disturbed him. He inquired the hour, and on being informed, was astonished to hear that it was so late.

"You have slept well?" said the chaplain.

"Never better in my life," responded the criminal, gaily. "I will now get up."

"And in ten minutes I will return," said the chaplain.

The reverend gentleman then quitted the cell—and Dysart proceeded to wash and dress himself with as much unconcern as he had displayed when eating his supper over night. On the return of the chaplain, he asked if the sheriff had yet arrived; but the response was in the negative. The Ordinary then hinted that it would be proper for them to join in prayer: but Dysart exclaimed, "You don't think, sir, that it is at all necessary just now—do you?"

"Prayer is always seasonable and of much avail," was the chaplain's response.

"But you feel convinced that I shall be reprieved?" said Dysart, with some little manifestation of uneasiness, or rather perhaps of impatience.

"The governor has assured me that such will be the case," answered the Ordinary, "and I believe him to be far too cautious a man to venture such a statement unless on good authority."

"When the sheriff comes I can ask him," observed Dysart.

"My good friend, that will be a breach of confidence," said the chaplain, in a tone of remonstrance, —"and would probably lead to the loss of our situtions for both the governor and myself."

"True! I had forgotten *that!*" exclaimed Dysart. "Will you be so kind as to ask the governor to come to me?"

"Certainly," replied the chaplain: and he once more quitted the cell.

When left alone, Dysart walked backward and forward with a restlessness that he had not before experienced. He endeavoured to shake off the feeling—but it was rapidly growing upon him. Horrible thoughts began to spring up in his mind. What if the Prince should have been playing him false all along—or alter his resolve at the last moment?—what if Ernestina had been deceiving him? —or suppose that every intention and every assurance had been sincere in those quarters, might not the reprieve come too late? These thoughts were dreadful. The unhappy man, hitherto lulled into complete security, had now suddenly awakened as it were to a galling, goading, agonizing sense of the tremendous fact that his life hung to a thread! He would have screamed out,—he could have yelled with mortal anguish: but at the instant the paroxysm reached its crisis, the chaplain returned to the cell, followed by the governor.

The expression of the two functionaries' countenances instantaneously relieved Dysart's awful terrors. The effect was the same as the sudden pouring of oil upon the raging billows: and even before a word was spoken, he felt angry with himself for having yielded to the influence of such agonising alarm.

"Good morning, Mr. Dysart," said the governor, taking him by the hand: then, in a lower voice he added, "A sealed packet from the Home Office, directed to the sheriff, has just arrived. But for heaven's sake do not appear to know this fact: it is as much as my place is worth to have told you."

"Not on any consideration would I injure you, my dear sir," answered Dysart, joyfully pressing the governor's hand, "after all your kindness to me. But is the sheriff come?—has he opened the packet?—does it contain the reprieve?"

"It cannot possibly be anything else," returned the governor. "The sheriff will not be here till a quarter to eight—nor will he open the packet in my presence. I dare not even ask him what it contains: but I have not the slightest—no, not the slightest doubt——"

"What o'clock is it now?" demanded the criminal, hurriedly.

"Half-past seven. Will you take some breakfast? Indeed, you *must* appear as if you anticipated the very worst," said the governor, with marked emphasis.

"Since I have nothing to apprehend, I can assume an air which shall pass for firmness," replied Dysart. "Yes—let me have some breakfast: it will warm me."

Leaving the interior of the prison for a few moments, we will again glance to the aspect of the scene outside.

The morning was dull and gloomy. and soon after the break of day, a fine mizzling rain had begun to fall. The crowd was immense. To the farther extremity of the Old Bailey in the one direction, and to the very verge of Smithfield market on the other, it was a complete ocean of human faces. Men and women—numbers of the latter with young children in their arms,—boys and girls, even of a tender age,—all were packed as densely as the aggregation of such a mass of life could possibly become. Every window and house-top commanding a view of the gaol's front and the looming gallows, had been put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Precisely opposite the gibbet, a first-floor apartment was tenanted for the nonce by the aristocrats who had passed the night at the *Saracen's Head;*—and having well breakfasted off devilled kidneys, coffee, and toast, these worthies found themselves in an excellent humour to *enjoy* the drama about to be enacted.

At a quarter to eight one of the sheriffs, the two under-sheriffs, and a couple of aldermen arrived at the gaol. They were immediately ushered into the governor's drawing-room; and the sealed packet from the Home Office was delivered to the sheriff. He at once retired into a private room to open it: and having perused the contents, which were laconic enough, he carefully

consigned the despatch to his pocket. On returning to the drawing-room, his countenance remaining as composed as before, afforded not the least indication of the nature of the official document which he had received—while etiquette forbade even the under-sheriffs to venture an inquiry upon the point.

"I understood you on Saturday," said the sheriff, addressing himself to the governor, "that there was no person then engaged to officiate as the functionary of the law."

"And such is still the case, sir," replied the governor. "I believed that some criminal within the walls would have accepted the post of Public Executioner: but only a few minutes before your arrival the turnkeys assured me that not a single soul would undertake the office."

"Then a proclamation must be made to the multitude outside the prison," said the sheriff. "I will proceed to fulfil that duty at once."

Accordingly, followed by the under-sheriffs and the governor, the high civic functionary repaired to the debtor's door; and ascending the steps of the gallows, he mounted the platform. A dead silence fell upon the congregated mass of people, the murmuring of their myriad voices suddenly ceasing, and the oscillation of the living waves subsiding into a calm. Every eye was fixed with an expression of curiosity and suspense upon the sheriff, as he proceeded to make the proclamation, which was to the effect that an individual was required to undertake the office of Public Executioner, and that should such volunteering individual have in any way rendered himself amenable or obnoxious to the law, he (the sheriff) was empowered to offer him a free pardon for his offences.

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a loud voice exclaimed, "I accept the proposition!"—and the savage-looking black fellow already mentioned, jumped upon the barrier and scrambled up to the platform of the gallows.

"Hooray!" shouted the multitudes, which for a moment had feared that they were to be baulked of the spectacle they had crowded thither to behold.

Nor less were the aristocratic exquisites at the two windows opposite, rejoiced to find that the drama would proceed without the interruption that had for an instant appeared to threaten its tragic development.

The sheriff descended from the scaffold and re-entered the prison, followed by the under-sheriffs, the governor, and the volunteer hangman: and, the clock having now struck eight, they all proceeded to the condemned cell, where Dysart and the chaplain were together.

The criminal, fully satisfied that his reprieve was in the sheriff's pocket, presented an aspect of firmness and bowed courteously to the civic authorities. These functionaries remained in the passage outside the door of the cell which was now left open; and the sheriff, addressing himself to the chaplain, said, "I wish to speak to you a moment."

The Ordinary hastened out of the cell; and as the sheriff drew him aside a little way down the corridor, Dysart perceived that he drew forth from his pocket a despatch of the invariable official shape and bearing a large seal.

"That is my reprieve!" thought Dysart: and the flood of life circulated with a more rapid flow in his veins.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the volunteer hangman, producing his whipcord to pinion the criminal's arms: then, as he drew the criminal gently aside towards the farther extremity of the cell, he hastily whispered "You've nothing to fear, Mr. Dysart. The sheriff has got your reprieve—*and I have seen it!*"

The criminal had recoiled loathingly from the first touch of the hangman—and the more so on account of his repulsive look, for the fellow's face was black as that of a negro: but the voice instantaneously sounded familiar to Dysart's ear—and surveying the wretch's countenance attentively, he recognised through the soot and grime that covered it, the features of Daniel Coffin!

Glancing towards the door, and observing that no one was noticing him particularly at the instant, Dysart gave the Hangman a nod of recognition: then, in a scarcely audible tone, he said, "You have positively seen the reprieve?"

"I saw the sheriff show it to the under-sheriffs, and even heard him read the private instructions on the margin," returned Coffin, in an equally low voice, as he pinioned the arms of the criminal.

"And those instructions—what are they?" demanded Dysart, with nervous impatience.

"That the reprieve is not to be produced till the moment the drop is ready to fall," responded the Hangman. "So you needn't be alarmed, sir: and in a quarter of an hour you will find yourself safe and sound back in this cell again."

"You are a good fellow, Coffin, for being anxious thus to reassure me," said Dysart, trembling somewhat with excitement, but not from actual fear.

"You've always behaved like a gentleman to me, sir," replied the Hangman: "and I should have been sorry indeed to tuck you up. But now's the time to move for'ard."

Having thus spoken in a hurried whisper, the Hangman signified aloud to the governor that everything was ready: and the procession was formed. The chaplain and sheriff, who had remained outside together conversing in the passage, went first. Then came Dysart, with his arms pinioned, and closely followed by the Hangman,—the governor, under-sheriffs, aldermen, and a few of the gaol officials bringing up the rear.

Along two or three stone passages did the mournful procession advance: and now the tolling of St. Sepulchre's bell became more and more plainly audible to the ear. Again did a sudden terror strike to the very heart's core of the criminal. Heavens! if the reprieve—the assurances that had hitherto sustained him—the promise of life, pardon, and liberty,—O God! if all these were but the delusions of his brain—the phantoms of his own imagination! That knell which rang so ominously—the solemn tread of the procession through the vaulted passages—the murmuring of the multitudes without—and now the deep voice of the chaplain commencing the service for the dead,—Oh! what could all this mean?—what did it signify? Wherefore this tremendous parade—this pomp and display of death itself—if all were to end in a continuance of life? And that chaplain's voice—did it breathe an accent of hope? Oh! no—no: it was profound—solemn—even sepulchral, as if warning him in unmistakable tones that this was indeed

no mockery, but an awful, appalling, stupendous reality! Yes—there was death in all this—death—death!—and the hideous conviction struck to the soul of Dysart that he was duped—deluded—deceived,—aye, unto the very verge of that grave which was already yawning at his feet!

Such were the thoughts that swept, ghastly as a train of spectres and swift as a flight of birds, through the imagination of Dysart. But the next instant his presence of mind returned: and all in a moment did he marshal and review in his fancy the circumstances that were favourable to him. The governor had solemnly affirmed that a despatch had arrived from the Home Office: he himself had seen the sheriff produce this despatch in order to display it to the chaplain;—and Daniel Coffin had given him assurances relative to the nature of its contents. It must be, then, a reprieve—it could be nothing else: oh! no—it could be nothing else!

But this hideous uncertainty!—the agonies, the tortures, the excruciations of a thousand racks were comprised therein! Oh! if he had not been so rash—so precipitate in trusting to others—if he had accepted the alternative of the three years' imprisonment—he would at least have been spared these immitigable horrors—these rending agonies! But was it too late? No: he would tell the sheriff and the governor everything—how his wife held the solemnly recorded pledge of the Prince Regent—how the compromise of three years' imprisonment had been offered him—and how he would now rather accept this proposal than proceed any farther in the pathway which terminated at the scaffold!

But, oh! miserable wretch that he was—his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth—he could not speak—he felt as if burning ashes were in his throat! Horror of horrors! what was he to do? Fleet and fast did his thoughts thus travel through his brain. *Travel!* they swept along quicker than the lightning! A whole volume would not contain the reflections which he thus made in the time that his feet were only taking a dozen steps! The page which now affords a succinct outline of those thoughts, sinks into utter insignificance when compared with the vast folios and bulky tomes that these ideas, if chronicled at length, would fill! His brain was on fire: it whirled—whirled—and yet he could not give utterance to a single one of those myriad million thoughts that were thus sweeping—dashing—flying—gushing—tearing through that maddening brain!

And now the breeze suddenly blows more freshly upon his countenance—and at the same instant his eyes, plunging through the opening of a low narrow doorway, recoil as it were from the sinister object which bursts upon them. For he is now traversing the little kitchen which is just inside that ominous-looking door whereon no eye ever fails to linger a moment when passing along the front of Newgate!

"Courage!" whispers a voice in Dysart's ear: he looks aside for an instant—and beholds the blackened countenance of the Hangman.

Recalled to himself, as it were from a hideous dream in which he appeared to have been walking, Dysart *does* summon all his courage to his aid: and fortunately for the complete gathering of his presence of mind at this supreme moment, he observes something white projecting from the sheriff's pocket. Ah! it is the reprieve—the reprieve which he has placed thus handy, so that it may be drawn forth in a moment. After all, Dysart feels that he is safe: and he ascends the steps of the scaffold, pinioned and trussed for death, with the conviction that he shall speedily descend those steps again to enter upon a new lease of life!

A solemn stillness once more falls upon the crowd—and not a murmur is heard. His is not a crime which calls for the expression of public opinion in yells and execrations: and therefore not a reproachful voice is heard—not an abusive syllable is uttered!

A dimness comes upon Dysart's eyes: he closes them hard—then opens them promptly again—and his sight has now a horrible clearness. The rapid glance which he flings right and left, shows him the countless myriads of human faces all turned towards that black funereal eminence on which he stands. The knell of St. Sepulchre's church falls like a sledge-hammer upon his brain. The eyes of the multitudes seem to pierce him through and through. And these are his sensations during the first quarter of a minute that he stands upon the scaffold: but then in that quarter of a minute are concentrated whole ages and ages of sense, feeling, faculty, and circumstance!

He is now recalled to a livelier and keener appreciation of his position by the touch of the Hangman, who nevertheless again breathes the word "Courage" in his ear. He strives to speak: but at the instant his lips are wavering, the halter circles his neck: a shriek rises to the very tip of his tongue—but it is stifled by the sudden drawing down of the night-cap over his face. Then the fingers of the Hangman are lifted from him—and he hears the wretch hasten away, his heavy feet stamping upon the hollow platform and then rushing down the ladder.

For never, never were all Dysart's faculties and organs of sense so acute as upon the present occasion: his very looks can penetrate dimly through the cotton night-cap drawn over his face!

But ah! the sudden sound as of a bolt touched beneath his feet, came thrilling up to his ear: and now again—but oh! with what an overwhelming force—struck upon his soul the conviction that he was betrayed! Yes—now 'twas sure—certain—beyond all doubt: O horror, horror—horror of horrors! he was there on the drop—'twas giving way beneath his feet——

It fell!—the blood gushed upward like lightning into his brain—strong spasms convulsed him—and in a few moments he hung a lifeless corpse!

The aristocratic party at the windows opposite remained until nine o'clock, when the body was cut down. They then returned to the *Saracen's Head*, paid the bill liberally, and took their departure in the Earl of Curzon's carriage towards the West End.

But in the meantime the Governor of Newgate was entertaining the sheriff, the under sheriffs, and the chaplain at breakfast, according to the custom which prevailed in those times relative to the mornings of public execution.

"Poor Lady Ernestina!" said the governor, "she will be dreadfully cut up. She all along made sure of her husband being reprieved: and when she left him last evening she expressed her conviction that she should meet him again to-day. From what she con-

descended to tell me, I also made certain that the extreme sentence would never be carried out."

"Such also was my opinion," observed the chaplain. "In fact, when you, sir,"—addressing himself to the sheriff,—"called me out of the prisoner's cell and produced that paper from your pocket, I made sure that it was the reprieve. You might have observed how startled I was when I looked over its contents."

"I did not pay particular notice," said the sheriff, with an air of indifference as he ate his muffin. "But, by the bye, you did not see it," he observed, turning towards the governor and the under-sheriffs.

Thus speaking, he tossed the paper across the table; and the individuals to whom he had last addressed himself, hastened to make themselves acquainted with its contents.

It ran as follows:—

"*Home Office, Saturday Evening, Oct. 20th.*

"Sir,

"I am desired by the Secretary of State to direct your attention to the demoralizing effect of capital criminals addressing observations from the scaffold to the assembled crowd; and it is requisite that this display, which has been much too common of late, should be prevented. I have therefore to request that henceforth the scene outside the gaol of Newgate, on the occasion of a public execution, shall be abbreviated as much as possible; and I have farther to desire that you will have the goodness to communicate this letter to the Reverend Ordinary of Newgate.

"I have the honour to remain, &c. &c.

"To the Sheriff of London."

This despatch was duly signed by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department. The governor, on reading it, exchanged significant glances with the chaplain, as much as to imply their regret at having been led by circumstances to buoy up Dysart with the hope of a reprieve until nearly the last minute: but they nevertheless kept the matter scrupulously secret in their own breasts. Nor did the governor entertain the slightest suspicion that he had all along been made a tool in the hands of Lady Ernestina Dysart, in thus lulling her husband into a false security.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE PREFECTURE OF POLICE.

A MONTH had now elapsed since Jocelyn Loftus was so suddenly consigned to a mysterious imprisonment in Paris, on the ground of some defect or error of nomenclature in his passport; and it will be remembered that he was thus held captive, by order of the Prefect of Police, at the Mansion of the Prefecture itself.

The room to which he was conducted has already been described as small and indifferently appointed. A tent-bedstead in an alcove, or recess,—a table—a couple of chairs—a washing-stand—and two or three other necessaries, constituted the furniture. There were two windows, each well protected with iron bars, and looking down into a gloomy court-yard surrounded with the high walls belonging to other portions of the same building—so that escape in that quarter appeared to be impossible. The door was massive and studded with large iron nails: bolts had creaked and chains had rattled outside when it was closed upon the prisoner;—and indeed every circumstance but too plainly indicated that this was in all respects a prison-chamber. Let us add that it was on the first storey and was approached by a long dark corridor, in which Jocelyn was occasionally allowed to walk—and our description is as complete as the purposes of the narrative require.

We stated that while Jocelyn was being conveyed in the hackney-coach to the Prefecture of Police, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth as to the cause of his arrest. The brief examination he had undergone before the Prefect himself, confirmed those suspicions which he had already entertained: nor had he much difficulty in divining who was the real author of his present imprisonment. He therefore now blamed himself bitterly for having rushed so precipitately on the enterprise with the name of *Jocelyn Loftus!*

But let us now specially note the incidents of his first day's incarceration. At about one o'clock a domestic in the Prefect's livery brought in a tray furnished with copious materials for a succulent repast: but it may be well understood that Jocelyn was in no particular humour to partake of it. The man, without being precisely stern-looking, was evidently of a cold and reserved disposition—a character well suited for such a place as the Prefecture and such functions as those which he had to fulfil. Jocelyn did not question him: for, in the first place, he was tolerably well convinced that this menial could know nothing of the secrets regarding his captivity—and secondly, even if he did, he was still more certain not to betray them.

Before quitting the room, the domestic said in a tone that was coldly polite, "I am commanded, sir to wait upon you with your meals three times a day; and on each occasion whatever orders you may wish to give, shall be obeyed—consistently with the regulations of the place. Books and writing materials you can have——"

"Yes—bring me books and writing materials," exclaimed Jocelyn, to whom it was at least some consolation to perceive that he was not to be treated with any extraordinary degree of severity.

The domestic retired—and shortly afterwards reappeared, bringing with him a large parcel of books and an ample supply of writing materials: but as he deposited them in the recess of one of the deep-set windows, he remarked, "You are at liberty, sir, to write as much as you choose *within* these walls: but I must beg you to understand that not a scrap of paper can pass hence without being previously examined by his Excellency the Prefect."

Having thus spoken, the man again departed carefully locking and bolting the door behind him: and when once more alone, Loftus began to examine the books which had been brought him. They belonged to almost every branch of literature—novels, poetry, travels, voyages, history, politics, science, and art: but he started back in sudden dismay from this perfect cyclopædia of amusement and instruction—for the thought flashed to his mind that *here* was indeed enough reading to while away the time of a twelvemonth's imprisonment! The next moment, however, he felt angry with

himself for having allowed the incident to operate as an omen or a presage: and he murmured half aloud, "The domestic who brought those books, could not possibly be aware whether my captivity is destined to last days or years!"

Then, with characteristic courage, Loftus conjured up every possible reflection of a soothing, hopeful, or consolatory nature.

In the evening the domestic reappeared, with the prisoner's supper, which also consisted of several dishes and a liberal supply of wine. Candles were furnished without restriction as to the period of their use—so that Loftus could burn them throughout the night if he felt disposed. In the morning the breakfast that was served up to him was as copious as the other meals: and when he had partaken of the repast, an old woman was introduced by the domestic to make the bed and sweep out the room—during which process, Jocelyn was permitted to walk up and down the long dark passage outside.

We have now afforded an idea of the routine of Jocelyn's first day at the Prefecture—and thence an estimate may be drawn of the monotonous nature of his imprisonment during the month which we must suppose to have elapsed since the date of his arrest. It will however be seen that he was treated at the Prefecture of Police with as much consideration as was compatible with the circumstances of personal restraint. But was he happy? Far—very far from that! His natural courage, noble fortitude, and elevated spirit enabled him to bear up as well as the most heroic of men could do, against the misfortune which had overtaken him: but still there were moments when he could scarcely restrain an outburst of bitter anguish, as he thought of his much-loved and far-off Louisa! What could she think of a silence so unaccountable and an absence so prolonged?—must she not either believe him false, or else that some terrible calamity had befallen him? In either case, he pictured to himself all the anguish which that charming creature was thus doomed to endure: and it went to his soul to reflect that so young, so lovely, and so affectionate a being should be plunged into such deep distress.

On several occasions he had written a letter to the Prefect, beseeching that any correspondence which should have arrived for him at Meurice's Hotel or at the General Post Office of Paris, might be given up to him: but the verbal answer which the reserved domestic invariably brought back, was to the effect, "that no communications had been received at all, at either place, addressed to Mr. Jocelyn Loftus." These announcements the young gentleman knew full well to be false: for he was convinced that Louisa would have unweariedly and incessantly written letter after letter, craving, imploring, and beseeching a response;—and it was therefore with as much bitterness of spirit as indignation of feeling, that Loftus came to the conclusion that the same arbitrary police power which had violated the sanctity of his private papers on the day of his arrest, had likewise taken possession of all correspondence that had subsequently arrived for him from England.

Our young hero's state of mind was not therefore very felicitous: and a month had thus passed in deep uncertainties, varying excitements, and perplexing anxieties.

One night Jocelyn had retired to rest earlier than usual: for his health had begun to fail him in the close captivity of that chamber—and moreover he had been giving way with a very painful intensity to the poignancy of his thoughts during the evening. The clocks in the thousand towers of the sovereign city of France were proclaiming the hour of nine, when having extinguished the light, Jocelyn thus sought his couch, exhausted alike in mind and body. A deep slumber fell upon him: and he was gradually borne into the elysian mazes of a delicious dream.

He fancied that he was sleeping on a splendid sofa in a magnificently-furnished apartment:—he thought he saw himself thus reclining full dressed, as if it were in the day-time that he had lain down in this manner to rest for a short while. The saloon to which imagination had thus wafted him, was flooded with a golden light—a more than earthly radiance that penetrated throughout—a celestial lustre that rendered each nook and corner as clear and shadowless as the centre of the room itself. And now, in the midst of that transcendent glow, it appeared to Jocelyn as if angels were passing through the ambrosial air—beauteous forms displaying a lithe and slender symmetry in the scant azure drapery that floated with the grace which no sculptural skill could ever illustrate in the massive marble! Some of these empyrean beings were crowned with stars: others bore lutes which seemed to send forth a delicious music, realizing the sweet superstition of the harmony of the spheres;—while others, again, carried garlands of flowers in their hands, or scattered wreaths and posies through the translucent atmosphere. But as the celestial train swept past, every angelic countenance was bent with an expression of sweet encouragement and smiling hopefulness upon the sleeping form of Jocelyn; and as he slowly awoke from this delicious dream, while the glory of the vision itself faded slowly and gradually away from his mental perception, he could not help thinking that it was an intimation sent from heaven to cheer his soul.

While in the fervour of his grateful piety he was silently breathing a prayer to his Maker, he was suddenly startled by a singular noise which seemed to come from within the wainscotting of the alcove or recess that contained the couch whereon he lay. He listened: the noise ceased—he concluded that he had been mistaken—and he endeavoured to compose himself to slumber again. But just as his eyelids were closing beneath the bat-like wing of drowsiness, that strange sound was repeated.

He started up—held his breath—and listened more attentively than at first. The noise was like that of some one endeavouring to pierce through the masonry by means of an instrument that worked tediously in a stealthy, scraping manner, rather than with a boldness which cared not for discovery. The thought instantly struck Jocelyn that some prisoner in the next apartment was endeavouring to escape: and this idea thrilled with a sensation of joy to his heart,—for the same means which could afford the hope of flight to a fellow-captive, would avail also for himself.

The noise continued—and Jocelyn was on the point of knocking gently in order to lead the individual, whoever it might be, into conversation—supposing that a sufficient depth of excavation

in the wall had been made to render their voices audible to each other:—but the young gentleman checked himself and paused to reflect ere he took any step whatsoever in the matter. Once more reposing his head upon his pillow, but still listening attentively, he reasoned in the following strain:—

"If this be some fellow-captive who is endeavouring to make his escape, he may perchance have been led to believe that the wall through which he is boring, opens either into an empty room or an unfrequented passage—or even perhaps into some court-yard or actual outlet. Such may be his impression: and therefore if I disturb him in the midst of his labours, he may become alarmed and desist. It will be better for me to allow him to proceed so far with his work that he will ascertain for himself into what place he is penetrating: and then it will be time enough to make known to him the presence of a fellow-prisoner in *this* room, supposing that he is now unaware of its being tenanted."

Having come to this conclusion, Jocelyn Loftus did not attempt to make himself heard by his neighbour: but he nevertheless continued an attentive listener to the work that was going on. The longer he thus listened the more convinced he became that his first conjecture was well founded, and that it was indeed some fellow-prisoner stealthily pursuing the means which he hoped would lead to escape. For two hours did the work thus continue; and by following it minutely with his ears, the young gentleman was enabled to comprehend its details. Thus was it that he could distinguish when pieces of mortar were removed or portions of masonry detached and taken out of the excavation; and at the expiration of those two hours, he heard his neighbour replacing all the mortar, stones, and bricks in the hollow thus made between the wainscot—doubtless to conceal the night's work from the eyes of the morning's visitors.

All was now still: but Jocelyn could not again very speedily settle himself to slumber—for an incident had thus arisen not only to break the hitherto monotonous routine of his imprisonment, but also to excite sudden and fervid hopes of escape.

Nevertheless, after a while sleep once more revisited his eyes; and when he awoke in the morning it was some time before he could persuade himself that the occurrence of the past night was not part and parcel—although perhaps another phase—of that dream which had visited him soon after he had retired to rest.

Having risen from his couch and dressed himself, Jocelyn awaited the arrival of the serious-looking domestic: and when that individual made his appearance at nine o'clock with the breakfast-tray, the young gentleman inquired, with an apparent air of indifference, whether there were many other prisoners in the Prefecture.

"I do not know, sir," was the laconic answer: and Jocelyn felt annoyed within himself for having condescended to even so slight an attempt to gratify his curiosity through the medium of his reserved and flinty-hearted jailor.

After breakfast, the livery-servant returned—accompanied, as usual at this hour, by the old charwoman; and while she was occupied in putting the room to rights, Loftus walked, as was his wont, in the adjacent corridor. This passage has already been described as long, dark, and gloomy: it had a door at the end communicating with the staircase—and from the side opened at least a dozen doors into no doubt as many prison-chambers. While walking in this passage on the present occasion, Loftus paused at the door of the room next to his own, and listened to hear if he could catch any sound: but all was still.

In a few minutes the old woman appeared upon the threshold of his apartment, with the intimation that she had finished her avocations therein. This was a signal for him to return to its solitude: and as he did so, the old crone hastily and furtively slipped a note into his hand. He clutched it tight—Oh! as tightly as the rope is clutched that is thrown out to the shipwrecked mariner struggling in the waves amidst the boiling surges of an infuriate ocean. The old woman hurried onward—and the serious-looking domestic, who had been lounging at the end of the dark passage, now came to close the door upon our hero once more.

The instant that Jocelyn was again alone, he hastened to examine the note that had so strangely been given to him. It was not addressed to any one: it was not sealed—but merely folded up into a small compass;—and its contents, which were written in a beautiful female hand, and in the English language, were as follow:—

"FELLOW-PRISONER,—If you value your liberty and are desirous to escape from this dreadful place, lend your assistance to one who is already working to the same end. Be not alarmed, therefore, at any unusual noise which you may hear, or at any strange occurrence that may take place, during the coming night: but be in readiness to fulfil any instructions that you may receive. I am told that you are an Englishman: and you will see by this that it is a fellow-countrywoman who thus addresses you."

The astonishment of Loftus at thus discovering that his bold and venturous neighbour was a female, may be more readily conceived than described. Yes—and by her writing she was evidently a lady of good education. That the old charwoman was an accomplice in her project of escape, was evident enough: but how this lady could hope to effect this escape by simply passing from one room into another, Jocelyn was at a loss to imagine. However, that some explanation would take place during the next night appeared tolerably evident—the lady having no doubt been enabled to calculate that it only required a little more labour to pierce entirely through the massive partition-wall.

Slow and tardy as the time ever passes to persons in captivity, yet this was the slowest and most tardily lingering day that Jocelyn had yet known in the Prefecture of Police. He thought the evening would never come: but when at last the sombre shades of twilight obscured his chamber, he even then calculated with considerable impatience that it yet wanted several hours of midnight. However, as nearly everything must have an end sooner or later, so did this wearisome day terminate at last: nine o'clock struck—the serious-looking domestic having brought in the supper-tray, retired with his wonted coldly courteous "Good night"—and now Loftus felt that he was free from any further interruption on the part of his crabbed janitor.

Candles had been lighted some time: he enden-

voured to read, but could not settle his mind to any one subject of all the departments of literature contained in the books at his disposal. He therefore rose from his chair and paced the room in an agitated manner; then he sat down again and perused for the hundredth time that day the mysterious note which he had received in the morning.

Yes—it was indeed a beautiful hand-writing—fluent, clear, and delicate as that of an educated Englishwoman. But, ah! if it had only been the writing of his Louisa, what transports of happiness would he now have enjoyed! However, if the present adventure upon which his neighbour had embarked, and in which he himself was about to participate,—if this adventure, we say, should end in the accomplishment of an escape,—then, within a very few days might he fold in his arms that beloved Louisa whose image was ever uppermost in his mind, and on whose behalf he experienced so much anxiety.

The clocks had struck eleven some time, when Jocelyn suddenly became aware that the sounds of the previous night were recommencing in the wall of the alcove. He threw himself upon the bed—applied his ear to the wainscot—and listened attentively. Yes—his adventurous neighbour was evidently taking out all the loosened mortar and masonry from the aperture: and in a few minutes he was satisfied that she was continuing the process of perforation by whatsoever instrument it was that she used. Jocelyn continued to listen with breathless attention, until presently he heard the instrument itself come in contact with the wainscot to which his ear was applied. Then suddenly all was still.

"Is that wood-work?" suddenly inquired a soft female voice from the other side.

Jocelyn answered in the affirmative.

"Then if you are indeed anxious to escape," resumed that same musical voice, "or if you will

at all events assist me to escape, you must contrive to remove a portion of the wainscot."

Jocelyn at once gave the lady such assurances that must have satisfied her both as to his own desire for self emancipation and his readiness to succour all her heroic attempts. He then drew forth the bedstead from the alcove; and by means of the knife which had been left with his supper-tray, he speedily loosened a panel of the wood-work and lifted it from its setting. He now perceived that an excavation had been made of nearly two feet square through a wall upwards of a foot thick.

"Take all these implements—haste!—quick!" said the lady in the adjoining room: and as she thus spoke impatiently, but with the rich melody of youthfulness in her voice, she thrust several articles through the opening.

These consisted of a ladder made of twisted silk and pieces of fire-wood—two or three files—a bottle containing a yellow fluid—three or four skeleton keys—and a very diminutive crowbar, the whitened end of which showed that it had been the instrument principally used for making the opening in the wall. The articles were speedily taken charge of by Jocelyn; and the appearance thereof instantaneously confirmed his former suspicion that an escape was to be attempted that night. But he had little leisure for reflection, inasmuch as everything was now haste, bustle, and impatience with the heroic lady. Indeed, no sooner had he removed the above-mentioned articles from the opening through which she had thrust them, than in the harried but harmonious accents of her voice, she said, "Now help me to pass into your chamber."

At the same time a pair of well-rounded, plump, and snow-white arms were thrust through the aperture: immediately afterwards came a head covered with a thick black veil—followed by a bust whose proportions were fraught with all the first freshness of youth. In fine, our hero taking hold of the lady's arms, assisted her as well and as delicately as he was able to pass her entire form through the opening.

When this was done and the heroine of the adventure, being raised upon her feet, stood before Jocelyn, the rapid glance which he threw upon her naturally expressed a certain amount of curiosity. He observed that she was of the middle height—with a form of youthful appearance, perfectly symmetrical in shape and characterised by much lady-like elegance. But her head, as already stated, was closely enveloped in a thick black veil; and although she could no doubt see perfectly well from behind the invidious screen, yet it was not equally easy for the eyes of an observer to penetrate through to her own countenance. That she studied Jocelyn earnestly and attentively for several moments, he could judge from the steadiness with which her veiled countenance was fixed towards him: but on *his* side he could positively distinguish neither trait nor lineament of her countenance at all. We should add that the dark veil, two or three times folded, was not merely thrown loosely over her head, but was tied in such a way round her neck that it served as a perfect mask and was not liable to be displaced by any motion or gesture on her part.

"You are doubtless astonished to see my countenance thus veiled?" said the lady, in the softest and most melting tones of her musical voice; "but it is in consequence of a solemn vow which I have made."

"A vow!" exclaimed Loftus, in astonishment, and almost with an accent of incredulity and suspicion.

"Yes—it is a vow," answered the lady, with a certain dignity in her tone and a drawing up of her form as if she resented the incredulous manner of our hero:—"a vow rashly and precipitately made, it is true—a vow pledged in the moment of despair—but to which I am not the less bound to pay implicit devotion."

"But wherefore so singular a vow?" inquired Jocelyn, now fancying that if the lady were not some adventuress, she was probably of unsettled intellects.

"You think that I am mad?" she said, thus evidently penetrating his thoughts once more, but now speaking in a milder and mournfuller tone: "it would be perhaps a blessing for one so profoundly acquainted with sorrow as I am, to sink into the oblivion of a benighted intellect, or become a prey to the fanciful vagaries of dreams! But, alas! alas! life has already been and still is too stern a reality for me. Under such circumstances, and considering the absolute necessity which exists for me to give you some explanation,—so as to convince you that you are not embarking in this night's enterprise with either an adventuress imprisoned for wrong-doing, or a mad woman confined on account of her malady,—for these reasons, I say, you will not deem me vain or frivolous in declaring that it is the beauty of this now veiled countenance which has been the cause of all my misfortunes! Yes—that beauty which, I solemnly declare, I myself value not, has rendered me the object of persecution and even of vengeance on the part of a host of great, noble, and powerful admirers to whom heated words I would not listen. Being my own mistress—or I should rather say, being a friendless Englishwoman, thus tormented by a hornet's nest of French princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, and barons—aye, and by even the very Prefect himself," she added with a bitter significancy of tone and with a gesture of deep meaning, —"I have passed through an ordeal——"

"Ah! then it is because you would not listen to the overtures of all those great personages—but the Prefect especially," exclaimed Loftus, now believing the tale and becoming indignant at the outrage thus offered to a lady and a countrywoman,—"it is for all this, I presume, that you have been imprisoned here?"

"Such is indeed the truth," answered the lady. "And now can you wonder if, when snatched from my home, and brought a prisoner hither three weeks ago, I should in my rage, my fury, and my despair, have made a vow to the effect that never, never again will I reveal my countenance to a being in the form of man! No—never, never," she exclaimed, with a sort of fanciful petulance, "until I encounter some one who shall have learnt to love me, *not* for the beauty of my countenance, or the magnitude of my fortune, but for those gentle, endearing, and more sterling qualities which as a woman I possess. Now therefore," she added with the fluvried tone of one who was well pleased at having finished a most painful explanation, "now, therefore, let us to work—and endeavour to insure our escape!"

"That is, after all, the essential point," said Jocelyn, not thinking it worth while to trouble himself

further concerning the eccentric lady's history, as every instant that was lost in the gratification of mere curiosity could only tend to diminish the eventual chances of success. "But tell me——"

"One word!" she interrupted, with a sort of petulant impatience that appeared to be characteristic of her: "we must at all events know how to address each other during the short time we remain together. What is your name?"

"Jocelyn Loftus," was the answer.

"And mine is Laura Linden," she immediately rejoined, in a tone so full of ingenuousness and unaffected simplicity that our young hero was angry with himself for having in any way suspected her even for a moment. "Perhaps you have heard of me before?"

"No—never," answered Jocelyn. "But permit me to observe that since your enemies appear to be so very numerous, and for such unworthy or rather scandalous causes, it will become my duty to propose to you, on our escape hence, such escort and protection as I may be enabled to afford."

"Which I shall accept cheerfully and thankfully once to England," replied Laura. "And now let us apply ourselves earnestly and vigorously to work."

"But have you already any settled plan which you are pursuing, Miss Linden?" inquired Loftus.

"I have ascertained the whole geography of the immense range of buildings which constitute the Prefecture," replied the lady. "The old charwoman, yielding to heavy bribes and to the still more munificent promises which I made her, has been won over to my interests. It was she who supplied me with such implements as I required: and she also described to me the situation of every part of the entire structure. There is not a room, nor a corridor, nor a courtyard, the topography of which remains unknown to me. This knowledge made me aware that if I succeeded in escaping from the windows of my own room, I should have to descend into a courtyard where detection and arrest would be inevitable. I therefore resolved—on learning that my neighbour (I mean yourself) was an Englishman—to penetrate into this room and achieve my flight by means of one of those casements. There is no sentinel in the court below: I know all its outlets—and with a courageous spirit to succour us, we may be free long ere the first ray of dawn shall glimmer in the eastern horizon."

"I presume," said Loftus, glancing upon the various articles laid upon the table, "that we are to file away the bars of the window—descend by the silken ladder into the courtyard—and make use of those skeleton-keys for any door that may bar our progress?"

"Such is the course which I propose," answered Laura.

"But this bottle of yellow liquid?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly.

"It is nitric acid to moisten the iron bars, and render the filing of them more easy. But quick! quick!" she again cried with petulant impatience: "let us to work!"

"It is now half-an-hour past midnight," observed Loftus, consulting his watch: "let us see if we have sufficient time before us to execute all that is to be done."

Thus speaking, he gently and noiselessly opened one of the casements: and holding a candle close to the bars, he examined them attentively.

"Yes, Miss Linden," he observed, "I will undertake to remove a couple of those bars in two hours—an hour for each. Then judging from your ideas of the topography of the place, shall we have sufficient time to accomplish all that may afterwards remain to be done ere daylight?"

"Yes—undoubtedly," answered Laura, with all the nervous trepidation of a captive impatient to free.

But scarcely was this rapid colloquy interchange when a gruff voice, coming from the courtyard below, exclaimed in French, "Shut that window up there, and put out the lights directly!"—and at the same time the rattling of a bunch of keys was heard.

"Good heavens!" murmured the lady, clasping her hands as if in despair: "it is the watchman going his rounds, who has thus observed us!"

"And now," said Loftus, in a tone of bitter disappointment, "we must look upon all our hopes as annihilated!"

"Not so—not so," ejaculated Laura, as if suddenly inspired with new courage: "but we must assuredly abandon our project for this night—and in the morning I will ascertain from the old charwoman the precise hours at which that watchman goes his rounds. We can then conduct our operations accordingly to-morrow night."

"Be it so," said Loftus, well pleased to observe that Miss Linden, who evidently knew far more concerning the arrangements of the Prefecture than he did, was not disposed to resign herself to despair.

"Now then, Number 15 there! are you going to put out those lights?" exclaimed the gruff voice of the watchman from the courtyard below: and again did he clank his keys, as if backing his words by the sounds of the emblems of authority.

"My good friend," said Jocelyn, approaching the casement, which still remained open, "this is the first time that ever I have been ordered to extinguish my candles——"

"But if you have been allowed to keep them burning, it was only through an indulgence, and not as a right," interrupted the watchman, doggedly.

"Is it because you observed the window open, that you now seek to curtail that indulgence?" asked Loftus, in as mild and as conciliatory a tone as he could possibly adopt.

"Well, I must say that it does look rather suspicious," returned the watchman, surly: "and therefore, if you want to avoid being reported to the Prefect in the morning, you will at once do as I bid you, by shutting that window and putting out those lights."

"For heaven's sake, keep not the man in parley, Mr. Loftus!" murmured Miss Linden, from the corner of the room into which she had shrunk: "he will suspect something—and all our hopes will be ruined!"

"Good night, my friend," said Loftus, speaking from the casement to the watchman below. "Your wishes shall immediately be complied with!"—and having closed the window, he blew out the candles.

The room was now suddenly plunged into total darkness: and the reader will not require to be informed that Jocelyn was placed in a very singular and awkward predicament. There he was, alone—in

the utter obscurity and in the depth of the night—in a bed-chamber, with a young and no doubt beautiful woman—a situation in which most men would have envied him. But his own high principles of honour and integrity—his fidelity towards Louisa Stanley, amounting positively to a devotion and a worship — and likewise the generous and manly considerations which he experienced on behalf of a young, eccentric, but heroic being whom circumstances had thus so suddenly thrown in his way—all these combined at once to raise him as it were above the embarrassment of his position and render him superior to its awkwardness, perplexity, and bewilderment.

"Miss Linden," he said almost immediately, "I am far more distressed on your account than on my own, that this enterprise should have experienced so sudden a check, after all the anxiety, toil, and fatigue which you have undergone."

"Oh! that is nothing—nothing, Mr. Loftus," she said, "provided success will smile upon the undertaking to-morrow night."

As she thus spoke our hero could judge by the sound of her voice, the slight rustling of her silk dress, and the gentle tread of her footsteps, that she was approaching towards him: and in a few moments he felt a hand laid gently upon his arm.

"You are endowed with an extraordinary courage," he observed, by way of response to her last observation.

"Yes—it is indomitable, so long as it is sustained by the excitement of the enterprise," answered Laura: "but a reaction soon comes on—and then, alas! I melt into all a woman's weakness. Guide me to a seat, Mr. Loftus: for a sudden faintness is coming over me," she murmured in a tone of tremulous entreaty: and at the same time she clung to our hero with her warm naked arms, as if to prevent herself from falling.

Jocelyn hastened to conduct her to the chair which he knew to be nearest: and she sank upon it like one overcome by physical and mental exhaustion.

"This veil suffocates me," she said, with that petulance which appeared the characteristic of her disposition: "thank Heaven, a pitchy darkness prevails at this moment—so that I can take it off and breathe fresh air!"—then by the sound which met his ears, Jocelyn knew that she was removing the veil from her head. "Now give me a glass of water, Mr. Loftus," she said, after a few moments' pause.

He felt his way to a shelf on which a decanter and glasses stood: and filling a tumbler with water, he returned to where the lady was seated.

"Place the glass to my lips,' she said, in a faint and dying tone, so that Loftus became very seriously alarmed lest she should swoon outright.

He hastened to comply with her request, and by raising the tumbler to her lips, enabled her thus to imbibe the cooling beverage.

"Enough, enough," she murmured, in a voice that was now scarcely audible: and her head drooped completely against Jocelyn's breast, as he stood close by the chair in which she was seated.

"Heavens! what can I do for you, Miss Linden?" he inquired, now truly perplexed and most cruelly bewilderered.

"Nothing, nothing—I shall be better presently," she said, still very faintly, but somewhat more audibly than before: "it is a passing indisposition—let me repose for a few minutes upon your couch, and then I shall be so far restored as to be enabled to creep back into my own room."

As she thus spoke, she clung to Jocelyn in such a manner that he was compelled to raise her in his arms, and sustain her — indeed, we might almost say carry her—towards the couch. But these attentions he bestowed upon her with as much tender delicacy as a brother would exhibit towards a well-beloved sister: and it might have also been with that sisterly reliance on her part which present circumstances were so well calculated to inspire,—it might have been, we say, in that same artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated spirit, that Laura Linden herself clung so tenaciously to our hero. At all events, full certain was it that her round plump arms encircled his neck—her full and well developed bust was in the closest contact with his chest—her head lay droopingly upon his shoulder—and her whole form was yielded up, as it were, in the utter abandonment of exhaustion and faintness, as a sleeping child is borne in the arms of a father. He felt her warm cheek against his own—her fragrant breath fanning his face—her silky tresses commingling with his own hair: and as she heaved quick short gaspings, like half-suffocated sobs, the firm bosom palpitated with rapid undulations against his breast. Thus, had there been aught of grossness or impurity in his imagination, he must have yielded to such exquisite temptations: for assuredly that position was seductive enough to melt the stoicism of an anchorite or vanquish the virtue of an angel.

Gently depositing Laura Linden upon the couch, Jocelyn inwardly hoped, by everything solemn and sacred, that she would not fall off into a complete swoon, but would speedily recover. He remained standing by the couch, in that same brotherly spirit of readiness to minister any attention that might be required: nor could he very well have retreated, even had he been so disposed—for the lady, apparently with the nervous tenacity of one whose ideas are thrown into confusion, had caught hold of his hands and retained them clasped in her own.

"Do you feel better, Miss Linden?" asked Jocelyn.

"Yes—much better, I thank you," she responded, pressing his hands as if in gratitude to her bosom. "You have been kind—very kind to me," she murmured in a tremulous tone: "no brother could have been kinder or more affectionate;"—and she imprinted a kiss upon the hand which was nearest to her lips at the moment.

Jocelyn started perceptibly at what seemed to him an uncalled-for manifestation of a too tender gratitude: and the next moment Laura suddenly abandoned the hold which she had upon his hands, exclaiming, "I feel so much better now, that I will return into my own room. But you must assist me to pass through the aperture," she added with that musical vibration of tone, which showed that she was smiling at the idea.

Rising slowly from the couch and in a manner which seemed to indicate that she was still weak and feeble, Miss Linden felt her way towards the opening in the wall—Jocelyn following close behind her. After three or four vain and ineffectual en-

deavours to pass her form through the aperture, she said in a voice apparently trembling with alarm, "Good heavens! I cannot possibly accomplish my purpose! You remember that you had to drag me through into your own room—and therefore I cannot pass back into my chamber, unless similarly assisted by some one *there*. What is to be done?" she demanded impatiently.

"Compose yourself, Miss Linden—and try once more," responded Loftus. "It is absolutely necessary that you should get back without delay, to remove all traces of our proceedings: otherwise the Prefect's livery-servant, when he visits our rooms in the morning——"

"Oh! yes—the chances of detection have now become fearful!" interrupted Laura, clinging as if in despair to our young hero. "But it is no use for me to try and pass through that aperture: I can not—it hurts me—it lacerates my flesh——"

"Then what in heaven's name shall we do?" asked Jocelyn, more cruelly bewildered and perplexed than ever.

"There is no alternative, I fear," replied the lady in a tone that suddenly became solemnly serious—for the predicament in which she was placed indeed seemed but too well calculated to shock the feelings of a modest damsel:—"there is only one alternative, I say," she repeated; "and that is to await as patiently as we can until the first dawn of morning shall afford us a glimmer of light by which we may enlarge the aperture. This will not take long to do, and will still leave ample time ere the coming of our jailor, to replace all the masonry and wood-work, and thus remove every trace of our proceedings. I fear, Mr. Loftus, that there is no other alternative than the course I have pointed out."

"It indeed appears so," observed Jocelyn, in a tone which expressed all the cruel embarrassment which he so keenly felt.

Our young hero and the beauteous Laura Linden therefore found themselves doomed to remain together for several hours in the darkness of the chamber and surrounded by all the temptations of this strange predicament.

CHAPTER LXVII.

LORD AND LADY SACKVILLE.

LEAVING Jocelyn Loftus and his eccentric companion for a while in the prison-chamber at the Prefecture of Police, we must now return to the English capital.

In a magnificently furnished saloon at Carlton House, and between ten and eleven at night, Lord and Lady Sackville were seated together upon a sofa. Nothing could exceed the splendour by which they were surrounded: and if every thing that was luxurious, gorgeous, and superb, could render existence supremely blest, then must this young and handsome pair have been pre-eminently happy.

The gilded furniture—the rich draperies—the thick carpets—the ornaments of rarest porcelain—the tables covered with all those fashionable trinkets, trifles, and nick-nacks, which, though mere useless nothings, are nevertheless so pre-eminently costly,—all these features, phases, and evidences of consummate splendour and refined luxury characterised the new abode of Lord and Lady Sackville. Indeed, one of the handsomest suites of apartments in the Prince Regent's palace had thus been assigned to them: and yet, although they were the envy and admiration of the entire fashionable world, we now find them seated mournfully together in that splendid saloon!

Nevertheless, Venetia looked transcendently lovely in the gorgeous dress that she wore; and her husband, as he gazed upon her, might well have been proud of possessing such a wife. On the other hand, never had Horace himself seemed more truly handsome; and any wife might have been proud of such a husband. Besides, was not their name gilded with a title?—did not the glory of a patrician coronet encircle their brow? Had not a pension of three thousand a year been conferred upon the newly-created peer, in order, as the cant phrase goes, "that he might be enabled to support his rank?" had he not an additional income arising from the office of Lord Steward in the Regent's Household?—and did not the tables in that very saloon groan beneath the evidences of the laviah profusion with which the Prince showered down the choicest gifts upon Venetia? Wherefore, then, was this noble couple a prey to melancholy? wherefore had a cloud settled upon their countenances. Had they not all that honour, wealth, splendour, and distinction could contribute or combine to ensure their felicity?—were they not the idols of the fashionable world?—was not Horace courted, flattered, and smiled upon by the proudest Dukes and haughtiest Earls?—and did not the stateliest Duchesses and the most exclusive Countesses regard Venetia as a being second only to a Queen? In a word, was not Lady Sackville caressed and fawned upon by the whole British Aristocracy, because she was the mistress of the Prince Regent?—and was not Lord Sackville similarly courted because he was the husband of that royal harlot?

Yes—it was precisely because Venetia was thus the mistress of the Prince, and it was because her husband was the pander to her shame—for these reasons was it they were mournful now. This was almost the first time they had found themselves alone together since the whirl of pleasure, gaiety, and fashionable dissipation had commenced immediately after Venetia surrendered herself to the arms of the Prince. But on this particular occasion his Royal Highness was engaged with the Ministers; and it happened that Lord and Lady Sackville were invited to no fashionable *re-union* for the evening—nor had they company in their own apartments. The consequence was that when the royal dinner-party had broken up, Horace and Venetia found themselves thus alone—thus as it were compelled to look each other in the face despite the feelings of shame that were struggling in their hearts. For be it understood that they were not yet so inured to depravity, nor so thoroughly steeped in profligacy, as to have become altogether callous to the whispering of the soul's innermost voices and the influence of the heart's better feelings.

"Venetia, my dearest wife," said Horace, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips, "tell me—are you happy?"

"Nay—answer me the same question *first*," said Venetia, looking in his face for a moment—then colouring deeply, and casting down her beauteous eyes, as if the lids were oppressed with a weight of shame.

"Did we not agree," asked Lord Sackville, "on that memorable night—or rather morning—when you returned to Acacia Cottage from Carlton House——"

"Oh! allude not thus particularly to that night!" said Venetia, with a strong shudder which swept visibly over her entire form, as a rapid breeze appears to bear a sudden ruffle along the surface of the lake.

"Pardon me, my love, for being too explicit," exclaimed Horace, noticing that cold tremor: "but I was merely desirous of reminding you of a special occasion on which we agreed that we would make ourselves happy in spite of all circumstances."

"Yes—I remember full well," returned Venetia: "and heaven knows that I have endeavoured to make myself, and also to make you, as happy as possible! But——"

"But what?" ejaculated Horace, starting from the sofa, and speaking with the nervous abruptness of a man who is irresistibly impelled to court explanations which he nevertheless dreads to hear.

"Sit down, Horace—sit down," said Venetia: "and I will tell you what I mean."

But instead of resuming his place by her side on the sofa, he seated himself upon a footstool—pillowed his head upon her lap—and said, "Now speak frankly, Venetia—and tell me all that you have to impart."

"Ah! this position which you have taken—this attitude which you have assumed—here—sitting at my feet," exclaimed Venetia, powerfully moved and profoundly touched, "reminds me of the days of our honeymoon—that honeymoon which was so short—yes, short but beatific like a glimpse of Paradise! Then we were all love—all confidence—all childish playfulness: we could look each other in the face, only to smile—and not to blush! But now—now, how altered is it all—what a change has come over us! By rising to an elevation which makes us envied, flattered, fawned upon, we have been made to loath, detest, and abhor ourselves—Oh! may God grant that we shall not end by loathing, detesting, and abhorring each other!"

"Heavens, Venetia! to hear thee talk thus," exclaimed Lord Sackville, "drives me mad. Why—even within a few hours after what may be termed your *fall*—yes, even the very next morning—we could look each other in the face without blushing! But now it seems as if the pangs of remorse and the poignancy of shame have sprung into keen vitality again—as if memory, instead of being blunted with the lapse of days and weeks, is actually becoming sharpened—as if pleasure could not drown that memory in its roseate floods—as if luxury could not lull our recollections into repose—and as if honours, riches, adulation, and rank could not appease us for what we have done!"

"Oh! look up at me, Horace—look up," exclaimed Venetia, in the melting harmony of that delicious voice which penetrated like a strain of celestial music into the soul: "look up to me a moment, my beloved husband! Let us forget what we are—let us forget what has passed—let us forget also what is to come—and think only of this present moment! For we are here alone together: and Oh! let us concentrate our thoughts into a dream, if it may not be a reality of bliss!—let us indulge in an embrace as warm, as tender, and as affectionate as those in which we were wont to steep our senses ere the date of what you just now so truthfully denominated *my fall!*"

"Yes—Oh! yes—let us embrace thus," cried Horace, suddenly inspired with all the enthusiasm of adoration and devotion for his young and beauteous wife: then, as he knelt at her feet, he gazed up passionately into her glowing countenance—while she looked down with equal tenderness upon him;—and then their lips met in a kiss more delicious than any in which those lips had joined since the memorable date of Venetia's fall.

But now as Horace, resuming his place upon the footstool, gazed up at his wife—now that he surveyed her with a fondness as fervid and as impassioned as ever he was wont to display previous to that night of her degradation and her shame,—he could not help feeling rejoiced at possessing a woman of such transcendent beauty, even though he was compelled to abandon her at times to the arms of another! But as his eyes slowly travelled over her entire person,—commencing with that superb auburn hair which lay upon her brow like dark gold on alabaster,—then lingering on that countenance every feature of which was so faultless in its chiselling and so classic in its style of beauty—those eyes of such tender melting blue that not even the hyacinth on India's fields could compare therewith—those lips of such delicious redness and dewy moisture, ever remaining the least thing apart so as not only to give a softly sensuous expression to the countenance, but also to afford a glimpse of teeth whiter than the pearls of the East,—then, continuing this survey, to trace the swan-like curvature of that snowy neck—the voluptuous fulness of those sloping and softly-rounded shoulders—the grandeur of that bust which swelled into a luxuriance more ample than sculptural richness ever set forth, rising like hemispheres of polished alabaster in their well-divided contours, yet with that hue of life wherein the marble can never rival the living form, and appearing to the look full of glowing ardour, warmth, and passion,—then, still proceeding with the survey, to mark the wasp-like symmetry of the waist, and the robust proportions of the naked arms, so admirably rounded, so polished, and so white,—then, with descending look, to gather from the folds of the drapery an outline or shadowing forth of the splendid symmetry of all the lower limbs, and to finish the survey with a view of the well-rounded but slender ankle, and of the long shapely foot resting on the very ottoman where he sate—Oh thus to wander over the beauties of that woman and linger on all her charms in detail from head to foot,—was it not indeed sufficient to crown the happiness of any man, to know that this transcendent being was his own?

"Now I feel happy once more—as happy as I was wont to be," said Horace, taking his wife's hands in both his own and playing with the long tapering fingers so beautifully crowned with the arching nails of pellucid resiness. "Thou art indeed wondrously beautiful, my Venetia: and I am rejoiced that, amidst the whirl of pleasure and dissipation, we have at length found an hour's leisure to be alone with each other thus."

"Yes—I love thee, my Horace—O God! I love thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly throwing her arms round his neck as if with the impulse of frenzied violence: then as a strong shudder again

swept through her form, she cried, almost with accents of despair, "Ah! would to God that I never more should be clasped in any arms but thine own!"

"Now tell me what you mean, Venetia," said Horace: "come, let there be confidence between us. I see that something is dwelling in your mind—and it will ease thee to disburden thyself to the ears of thy husband."

"Listen then, my beloved Horace—and I will tell thee," said Venetia, in a low and stifling tone, as if her very thoughts were choking her ere she gave utterance to them. "But there — pillow thy head upon my bosom, with thy face downward—so that I may not meet thy looks while I proceed to unveil the secret cause that makes me shudder. It is," she continued in a low, deep, almost hollow tone, as if her voice had suddenly lost its wonted harmony—"it is that I loath, hate, and abhor that Prince to whom I have been sold—or rather to whom I have sold myself!—it is that I detest the hypocrisy which compels me to smile upon him, to appear to receive his caresses joyfully, and to be compelled to lavish upon him the tenderest caresses in return! But worse, worse than all this," added Venetia, bending down her head so that her lips touched her husband's ear as his own head reposed upon her bosom: then in words that seemed to him as if coming from the mouth of a snake, she whispered, "It is, Horace, that I would sooner submit to the hideous pawings of an imp, than to the loathsome embraces of that filthy sensualist!"

Horace started up, with a violent sob suddenly bursting from his breast: and beginning to pace the room in a manner fearfully excited, he exclaimed, "O horror! that my own wife should be doomed to make such a revelation as this to my ears!—Oh! that one whom I have loved so fondly, madly, devotedly—and whom I still love so well—should be consigned to so hellish a fate—so damnable a destiny! But it is all my fault—my fault," he repeated, striking his breast forcibly: "it is I who could have saved her while she was as yet far off from the precipice—it was I who could have rescued her at the moment she was tumbling above it! But, no—base villain that I was! I suffered her to fall."

"Reproach not yourself, my dearest husband," murmured the well known voice which had now regained all its wonted sweetness and characteristic melody—and at the same instant a beauteous white hand was laid upon his shoulder. "It is not your fault! I was fore-doomed and predestined even before you and I first met! You knew it—you know it, Horace," repeated Lady Sackville; "and long before you agreed to marry me you were aware how inextricably I was entangled—by what solemn vows I was engaged—by what pledges I was bound—and under what influences I was controlled! You knew that all the appearances of ease, comfort, and wealth, which surrounded me at Acacia Cottage, could have been swept away in a moment had I dared deviate from the path which had been chalked out for me to pursue: you were likewise aware that Mrs. Arbuthnot herself was a spy upon my actions, reporting every look, word, and deed of mine to the supreme authority in Stratton Street. Such was my condition before my marriage with you: and since——"

"Ah! since," ejaculated Horace, with passionate vehemence: "it is this that goads me to desperation! For when once you were my wife, I could have rescued you from those toils which had previously enthralled you—I might have turned round upon those who had thus enmeshed you in their toils—I could have said, '*This lady is my wife, and shall not be the slave of your intrigues,*'—all this could I have done—and you would have been saved—and we might still be enabled to look each other in the face without blushing at the thought of that crowning degradation to which you, my unfortunate wife, have been doomed to submit!"

"Not so, not so, Horace," said Venetia, now evidently taking upon herself the task of consoling, reasoning, and tranquillising her husband: "for had we dared, when our hands were joined in matrimony, to rise up boldly against the authority which I had previously sworn to obey—that very authority, too, which assented to our union only on express and positive conditions—all the *past* would have been pitilessly and remorselessly made public in order to stamp me with the reputation of an adventuress!"

"They could not have done it—they dared not," cried Horace, stamping his foot with indignation. "There was no ground for it: you were no adventuress—if you were, 'twas by others you were made so——"

"Ah!" said Venetia, with a peculiar look, "you forget into whose hands I fell, and who first introduced me——"

"Enough, enough of all this!" ejaculated Horace, suddenly: "I see that you are right: we could not have acted otherwise than we have done! And after all," he added, abruptly, "we are fools to make ourselves miserable. I am Lord Sackville—you are Lady Sackville: I am a Peer of the Realm—you are a Peeress: we possess titles and pensions which cannot be taken away from us—our fortunes are therefore made for life; and it is now our bounden duty to endeavour to enjoy that life as well as we are able."

"Yes—we must make up our minds to adopt this course," said Venetia. "And indeed," she cried, with a sudden access of that callous, selfish, heartless feeling which marks the thorough *woman of the world*,—"we possess all the realities and substantials—the essentials and the materials—to make existence thoroughly happy. It will therefore be our own faults if we allow sentiment and feeling to interfere with that happiness."

"Yes," observed Horace, readily arming himself with the buckler of that cold selfishness which Venetia had just assumed: "it will only be a false feeling and a maudlin sentimentalism that can be allowed to interfere with the realities of our happiness. Let us then agree, solemnly agree," continued Horace, "never more to talk softness and tenderness to each other—but to look, speak, and act as the thorough man and woman of the world."

"Yes, cheerfully do I subscribe to that agreement," responded Venetia.

"Then henceforth our very love shall cease to be a sentiment," continued Horace, "and shall merely be a sensualism. We will have no jealousies—piques—vexations——"

"No boyish and girlish dalliance and romance," added Venetia;—"no poetry of the feelings——"

"Naught save passions, cravings, and impulses

that become men and women of the world," exclaimed Horace. "And now, my beautiful wife—as thou art indeed more ravishingly beautiful than ever this evening—especially with that rich glow upon thy cheeks,—let us retire to our own chamber that in each other's arms we may taste the joys of paradise."

With the wanton glow deepening upon her countenance, and with a soft and sensuous lustre stealing into her swimming eyes, Venetia was extending her hand towards her husband, when the door suddenly opened—and the Prince Regent burst somewhat unceremoniously into the room.

"My dear Horace—my dear Venetia," he said, tapping the former familiarly upon the back, but at once flinging his arm round the waist of the latter,—"I thought I should have been kept up by the Ministers till two or three o'clock this morning: fortunately, however, I have got rid of them—and now I am my own master once again."

Thus speaking, he gave a significant nod to Lord Sackville, who was compelled to obey it by at once leaving the room. But as he turned away to seek the door, the colour came and went upon his cheeks in such rapid transitions, and he bit his ashy lip so violently, that the poignancy of his emotions may be better conceived than described.

Venetia remained in the gorgeous saloon with the Prince—while her husband, not only baffled in the anticipation of enjoying the company of his own wife that night, but also compelled to sneak like a vile cur away, retired to his solitary chamber. There he was compelled to gloat upon his titles and his honours, in order to sooth the sense of shame and degradation that rankled so bitterly in his mind.

Whatever annoyance Venetia might have felt at being thus forced to yield to the whims and minister to the phantasies of his Royal Highness, she nevertheless most artfully and successfully veiled her emotions beneath a smiling aspect.

"Do you know, my angel," said the Prince, who had evidently been drinking with tolerable freedom, and whose vinous breath was most sickly and nauseating to Venetia as he bestowed hot kisses upon her countenance; "do you know," he said "that those cursed Ministers, by coming so suddenly and so unseasonably to pester me on State affairs, deprived me of a little pastime which certain young ladies had contemplated for my diversion? However, it is not yet too late," he exclaimed, starting to his feet: "and if you choose, you shall be a spectatress, though an unseen one, of the amusement."

"Of what nature is this pastime?" inquired Venetia, eagerly catching at any thing that seemed calculated to release her from the loathsome caresses which the Prince was now lavishing upon her.

"Come and see," he replied: and giving her his arm, he conducted her across the principal landing, down a long passage, into an ante-chamber, at the extremity of which was a glass-door communicating with another apartment.

"Remain here, my love," said the Prince: "but if the phantasy should seize you to come and join our sport, pray do so without ceremony."

Having thus spoken, and bestowing another parting caress upon Venetia, the Prince hastened by the glass-door into the adjoining apartment.

Lady Sackville now approached this glass-door; and peeping between the crimson blinds in such a way that she could see everything without being seen herself, she plunged her looks into the interior of the magnificent saloon which his Royal Highness had just entered. For magnificent it indeed was—furnished in the most luxurious style, and flooded with the light poured forth by numerous chandeliers and lamps. But what chiefly interested Venetia, was the circumstance that five or six young ladies, all of whom she recognised as belonging to the proudest families of the Aristocracy, had gathered round the Prince, and were assailing him with all the artillery alike of their charms and their wit. Venetia was not jealous at the position in which her royal lover was thus placed: she loathed and detested him too cordially to experience a sentiment which though in itself a noxious weed, yet can only flourish when moistened by the dews of love;—and she likewise despised and contemned him more than ever for having brought her to behold the present spectacle.

"He believes me to be utterly and thoroughly depraved," she thought within herself, "and that I take delight in all kinds of profligacy. Well, perhaps the time may come when I shall do so. At all events, henceforth I shall never hesitate to follow my own inclinations, and gratify any caprices that may take possession of me: for I perceive full well that virtue is a mockery—delicacy a laughing-stock—and propriety an imaginary thing, within the precincts of a Court!"

Venetia was thus musing to herself, when she became aware of footsteps behind her. She turned abruptly round—and beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

Now, it will be remembered that the baronet, when availing himself of his turn to prosecute the love-campaign against Venetia (then Miss Trelawney), had proposed marriage to the lady; and though she had declined the proposal with a considerable amount of raillery and smart rapartee, they had parted most excellent friends. It is true that Venetia was fully aware of Huntingdon's having employed Captain Tash to watch her movements but as she had subsequently derived a positive and considerable advantage (in the Malpas affair) from that circumstance, she was by no means inclined to cherish it as a grudge against the baronet. Moreover she did not forget that he had been one of the first to congratulate her at St. George's Church upon her marriage. Altogether she rather liked him; for he was excessively good-tempered—and we have already said that he was of handsome though dissipated appearance: but then it was that pale and interesting aspect of dissipation which is not without its admirers amongst ladies in the fashionable walks of life.

From these observations the reader will not be surprised to learn that Venetia extended her hand in a most friendly manner and smiled very graciously, as she thus found herself face to face with the baronet.

"Ah! Lady Sackville," he exclaimed, evidently astonished to meet her in that ante-room. "It is always a pleasure to encounter you anywhere: but may I ask what on earth your ladyship is doing here?"

"The Prince—with that exquisite taste which so often characterises him," replied Venetia, an expression of peculiar contempt curling her lovely

ſip,—"brought me hither to behold some drama in which he is doubtless to perform the principal part."

"It was precisely to take a share in this said drama," observed the baronet, "that the Prince invited me hither also. It is true that I am somewhat behind time: but I cannot regret a delay which has produced me the pleasure of meeting your ladyship."

"You know," said Venetia, in a tone of good-humoured raillery, "that I always take compliments for precisely what they are worth."

"If the syllables which fall from my lips were diamonds," answered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, "they would still be of infinitely too poor a value to form a sentence that shou'd adequately proclaim your praise."

"That is assuredly the most costly flattery that has ever yet been offered up to me," observed Lady Sackville, with one of her sweetest smiles.

"But are you not going to enter the room where your presence is doubtless wanted?"

"I would much rather remain here, if your ladyship would permit me," replied the baronet, his looks settling upon her with an admiration which though fervid was full of respect.

"I cannot possibly refuse such agreeable companionship," answered Venetia: and suffering her eyes to linger upon him for a moment, she gave him as it were that coquettish kind of encouragement which may in reality mean nothing, but which an enthusiastic admirer is sure to interpret far otherwise.

"But will you remain here?" asked the baronet, glancing towards the door leading into the saloon.

"Most assuredly," returned Venetia. "I am anxious to behold this drama in which you were to perform a part: and there can certainly be no harm in my contemplating the scene, inasmuch as

I recognise five or six young ladies of the highest rank about to join in the diversions."

While thus speaking, Lady Sackville stooped slightly down, and peeped between the blinds. Sir Douglas Huntingdon followed her example; and their heads thus came in gentle contact. The baronet was not likely to withdraw from so pleasant a vicinage; and Lady Sackville did not. Their heads thus remained touching each other—their hair mingling; and in this position did they contemplate what was passing within the gorgeously furnished and brilliantly lighted saloon.

The young ladies of aristocratic birth were clad in the light and gauzy apparel of figurantes, with their hair tastefully arranged—so that it appeared as if their forms were arrayed and their toilet chosen with a view to produce a dramatic effect. Very beautiful indeed were these young ladies: but it was evident from their burning looks and wanton attitudes, that modesty with them was but a garment of convenience.

A strain of music stole softly through the room—issuing from a piano the position of which was unseen by Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon at the glass door: and now the aristocratic young ladies timed their graceful steps to that delicious harmony. Taking from a sideboard several garlands and wreaths of artificial flowers, they raised them with their bare arms above their heads, playing with them as it were in a manner that enabled them to show off the beauties of their forms in attitudes more classically graceful, more studiously indelicate than the most reckless ballet-dancer or figurante of the present day. Then suddenly quickening their pace, they whirled round and round the Prince—flinging the garlands and the posies at him—endeavouring to trip him up with the wreaths—and finally making him the butt of a variety of practical jokes, more calculated however to excite than to hurt him.

On his side, the Prince Regent amused himself in several ways. Sometimes he raced and chased after the young ladies—at others he threw himself panting and puffing upon a sofa, one of the aristocratic beauties acting the part of Hebe and bringing him a delicious beverage in a crystal cup. Or else, he would suddenly assume a thoughtful and sentimental demeanour,—either taking a seat at a distance, or else leaning pensively against a pillar,—so as to entice the ladies towards him: and then, as they gathered around him again, he would abruptly seize hold of the nearest—fling his arms about her—and cover her with kisses, amidst the pealing laughter and delighted cries of all the rest.

For upwards of ten minutes did Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon continue peeping through the blinds—their heads still remaining in that contact which we have before noticed. The spectacle within the saloon was, of a surety, sufficient to inflame their imaginations: and it certainly produced this effect. Moreover, on the one hand Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in such an attitude that by casting down his eyes he could plunge his looks amidst the treasures of Venetia's glowing bust: and on the other hand, the lady herself, by casting an occasional sidelong glance at her companion's profile, was led to the reflection that he was really much handsomer than she had even supposed him to be.

"What think you of that spectacle?" she suddenly exclaimed, raising her head from the blinds: and as her looks met those of the baronet, the colour deepened upon her cheeks.

"I can only say that I regret we have not some artificial flowers here in this ante-room," replied Sir Douglas: "as your ladyship might in that case condescend to practise the same innocent pastime with me."

"It is a punishment, and not as a jest, that I throw this at thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly detaching a bouquet from the corsage of her dress, and tossing it towards the baronet.

"Ah! then it is as a revenge, and not as a mere insolent liberty, that I treat your ladyship *thus*," returned the baronet: and suddenly throwing his arms around Venetia's neck, he pressed his lips to her's.

She received the caress without resentment, certainly—although perhaps she did not exactly return it. But in the look which she flung upon the baronet, as she disengaged herself from his arms, there was something which elevated his hopes to a frenzied height.

"Begone now," she said hastily: "let not the Prince suppose that you have been lingering here with me."

This very remark at once seemed to place the lady and the baronet upon the most familiar footing, by implying as it were that a secret had suddenly sprung into existence between them. Intoxicated with the thought that Venetia—the brilliant, beauteous, incomparable Venetia—would yet bestow her favours upon him, Sir Douglas Huntingdon snatched up her hand—pressed it to his lips—and then hurried from the room.

Almost immediately afterwards the Prince came forth from the saloon, carefully closing the glass-door behind him: and perceiving Venetia's flushed cheeks and palpitating bosom, he attributed her excitement to no other cause than the voluptuous spectacle which he had indeed purposely brought her hither to view in the hope that it would inflame her passions to a maddening height.

"Come with me, adored one," he murmured, as he pressed his mouth to those lips that still bore the imprint of the baronet's far more welcome caress: then fixing upon her a look all burning with desire, the royal voluptuary led his mistress away to his own suite of apartments.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE KING'S BENCH.

At the period of which we are writing, the authority of the Secretary of State had not invaded the King's Bench Prison with those innovations, encroachments, and changes which have since robbed that establishment of all its peculiar glory. The immense enclosure had not then been divided into different compartments and yards, respectively appropriated for the degrees and grades of insolvency and indebtedness: but the Bench was then indeed in its glory—as the cesspool of the West-end of London!

Resembling an enormous barrack standing in the midst of spacious grounds, girt by a wall of the same height as the edifice itself, and covered

with those revolving iron-spikes that are technically termed *chevaux-de-frise*,—having also several detached buildings, such as the State House, the Coffee House, and the Kitchen,—and with the principal portion of the grounds themselves divided into racket courts—such was the King's Bench Prison.

But there were many features connected with the place which were celebrated *then*—have been celebrated until very late years—and *still* remain doubtless memorable in the minds of thousands and thousands who have passed through the ordeal of captivity there. For instance, there was the strong room, in which obstreperous prisoners were confined,—the chapel, where the parson preached to the clerk, and the clerk said "amen" to the parson, for want of a congregation,—the little market-place close by the kitchen, — and the three pumps which marked the limits of each racket-ground, the central pump being dignified with the name of the Dolphin. Then there was the Tap, where the genuine beverage brewed by Barclay and Perkins found shoals of customers from morning to night: and at the other extremity of the building, there was another public room for the sale of beer, and bearing the sign of the Brace. Moreover, in the coffee-house there was an apartment enjoying the aristocratic distinction of the Wine Room, although considerably smaller and a trifle less comfortable than the parlour of a fifth rate pot-house out of doors.

These and several other features connected with the Bench, are cherished in the memories of thousands and thousands up to the present day: and now, as some old prisoner takes his lonely walk up and down the melancholy parade, he sighs as he recals to recollection those times when that parade and the adjacent racket-grounds were swarming with life—when the whole scene was rather that of a fair than of a prison—and when the voices of revellers in the tap, players and betters at racket, merry fellows shouting from the windows, and itinerant venders of all kinds of comestibles, mingled strangely together and filled the air.

There were, also, until late years, some curious characters within the walls of the King's Bench Prison. First and foremost was a stout, bluff-looking, red faced man, not unlike a sailor in his build and rolling walk. This was Yorke, the crier,—whose avocations consisted in escorting visitors to the rooms of friends whom they came to see—crying things that were lost, or making announcements of festivities that were to take place either at the Tap or the Brace—and performing all kinds of odd jobs for anybody who was able to pay him. Next, as the presiding genius of the Market-place, might be seen a tall, gaunt, scraggy old woman, with a very weather-beaten face and a nose and chin that nearly met, like the profile of old Mother Hubbard in the picture-books. The female of whom we are speaking, was known as Old Nanny: and she sold fish, vegetables, and anything else by which she could turn "a decent penny." She generally were either a man's great coat or else an old brown cloak; and a black bonnet as rusty as a japanned coal-scuttle that has been very much neglected, was perched so airily and jauntily on the top of her head that one would really have thought Old Nanny was a coquette in her way.

In a sentry-box at the entrance of the innermost lobby, invariably stood from morning to night a most dreadful-looking old man, with his face twisting itself up into all kinds of malignant, spiteful, and ferocious expressions. He wore upon his head a great fur cap which gave him, when viewed from a considerable distance, a false air of the Lord Mayor's Swordbearer. This nasty-looking veteran-prisoner was called Old Sims, and he posted himself in that sentry-box that he might obtain alms from visitors entering the place, to attract whose notice he was wont to shake a few pence in a great tin box with a hole in the top to receive any additional pence which the hand of benevolence might drop in.

Several other remarkable characters were there;—and to a new comer entering the place as a prisoner, as well as to every one having business there as a visitor, were all the above local features and human curiosities duly pointed out. Of the latter species we must not forget to observe that there were several rare specimens in the shape of gentlemen who had been there for ten, twenty, or even thirty years, and who could get out at any moment they chose, but who unaccountably preferred dwelling within those spike-crowned walls.

Such was the King's Bench in the time of which we are writing; and indeed, the description would hold good down to a period of about eight or ten years ago. But, as we have above hinted, the ruthless hand of official authority suddenly annihilated all indulgences and liberties with one fell swoop. Were an equally sweeping reform to be applied to all the great institutions of this country, incalculable advantages would be the speedy result.

On being arrested at the suit of Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, for the sum of five thousand guineas, Colonel Malpas was borne off to the spunging-house of Mr. Moses Ikey in Fetter Lane. There he remained for nearly three weeks, in the hope of being able to come to a settlement with his creditor: but vainly did he apply to his wife's relations—they sent him no answer. Vainly also did he address himself to some of his fashionable friends: the affair at the banquet and the chastisement he received from Captain Tash had got whispered abroad, and the Colonel found himself cut accordingly. The propositions which he made to Mr. Emmerson were likewise treated with silent contempt; and when he wrote a letter full of penitence to the Countess of Curzon, it was returned to him unopened in a blank envelope—the handwriting of the address having been to her ladyship a sufficient indication from whom the missive came.

Perceiving, therefore, that he had no immediate chances of extricating himself from his difficulties, and finding it too expensive to remain any longer at the establishment of Mr. Moses Ikey, where the meanest and nastiest fare was served up at the dearest and most exorbitant rate,—the Colonel resolved to move over to the King's Bench. His solicitor accordingly obtained the necessary writ of *Habeas Corpus*: the Colonel and his portmanteau were consigned to a hackney-coach, under the care of a tipstaff;—and in due course the aforesaid Colonel and portmanteau were deposited in the upper lobby of the far-famed prison. There he was at once called upon to pay a certain amount for gate-fees: and having done this, it

was suggested to him that "all gentlemen as called themselves gentlemen were accustomed to behave as sich and treat the turnkeys." To this farther drain upon his exchequer the Colonel likewise submitted; and he enjoyed the supreme satisfaction of having his health drunk by the three thirsty-looking turnkeys belonging to the upper lobby, and the two hungry and thirsty-looking turnkeys annexed to the lower lobby.

He was now escorted to the coffee-house, where, upon inquiry, he found that he could be accommodated with a bed-room—which bed-room, upon inspection, turned out to be about the same dimensions as an ordinary clothes-press. However, the Colonel was compelled to submit to the necessity of the case: and it being now five o'clock in the afternoon, he inquired what he could have for dinner. The reply was "anything he chose to order:" but it subsequently proved that a steak or a chop would come most conveniently within the culinary capabilities of the establishment.

Having accordingly agreed upon the materials for his dinner, the Colonel sate down, dolefully and despondingly enough, to read the newspaper in the wine-room. But scarcely had he commenced the perusal of a ponderous leading article on nothing at all, when he was startled by the sudden bursting forth of a stentorian voice just outside the window. He listened, and heard the following announcement duly and deliberately made:—

"O yes! O yes! O yes! This is to give notice that if any body has found an old pair of black breeches, new seated, which was took from the winder of Mac Hugh the tailor's room, Number 3 in 10 Staircase, and will bring them to the crier, he shall receive a pot of half-an-half for his trouble and no questions axed. God save the King!"

Old Yorke—for he it was who gave forth this very interesting and exciting announcement—paused for a few moments—cleared his voice from a little huskiness that had seized upon it through too powerful a vociferation—and then communicated another piece of intelligence to the admiring denizens of the Bench:—

"Oyes! O yes! O yes! Know ye all whom it may consarn, and take notice, that a Free-and-Easy will be held to-night in the Brace, for the benefit of Mr. Peter Sniggles, who had the misfortune to cut his head open by falling dead drunk down No. 10 Staircase. The cheer will be taken by Mr. Joseph Tubbs at 8 o'clock precisely, when several comic songs and other vocal harmony will take place. God save the King!"

Old Yorke then passed on from the vicinage of the Coffee House to repeat the announcements in other parts of the building; and the Colonel learnt from the waiter who brought in his dinner that those announcements were really genuine and seriously meant, and not a mere hoax, as Malpas had at first imagined them to be.

Having partaken of his meal, and while sipping the first glass of an execrable pint of Port, the Colonel was informed by the waiter that a gentlemen wished to speak to him.

"Who is he?" inquired Malpas.

"Well, sir, he's a lawyer as is well known in this here place," answered the waiter, "and does a sight of business for genelmen in difficulties. He whispered to me to that he could get you out of quod in three or four days——"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Malpas, his countenance brightening up. "What is his name?"

"Mr. Joshua Jenkins," answered the waiter. "Shall I tell him to walk in?"

"By all means," responded the Colonel: "and bring a clean glass, as perhaps Mr. Jenkins will do me the favour to take some wine with me."

The waiter slid out of the room with a most praise-worthy alacrity, considering that he had to drag with him a pair of shoes down at the heels and a great deal too large for his feet. In a few minutes he returned, escorting a short seedy-looking individual, with very dirty linen and an unmistakable Jewish countenance. In fact, the personal appearance of this gentleman was by no means such as would have induced a cautious individual to trust him to get change for a five-pound note. The Colonel, therefore,—surprised and disgusted at this unpromising aspect of the man of business,—received him in a somewhat frigid and haughty fashion, just barely inviting him to be seated, but not choosing to take any notice of the circumstance of an extra glass being placed upon the table. Mr. Joshua Jenkins was however a gentleman of the free and easy school; and at once drawing a chair close up to the table, he observed, "Well, Colonel, so you are lumbered at last!"

"You speak as if you knew me, sir," remarked Malpas, surveying him with undisguised disgust.

"Oh! I know everybody by name about town," replied Mr. Joshua Jenkins, with a cunning leer: "and therefore it was not likely that the fashionable name of Malpas should remain strange to me. In fact, I knew when you was locked up over at Ikey's; and I should have come to see you there, but I thought by your stopping at such a place you was making arrangements to get out. Now, however, that you have come over here I thought it high time to introduce myself. So here's better luck to you, Colonel," added Mr. Jenkins, coolly filling the glass and raising it to his lips: then with a familiar nod across the table, he tossed off the contents.

"And pray, sir," inquired the Colonel, sinking back perfectly aghast at this King's Bench ease and hail-fellow-well-met unceremoniousness,—"and pray, sir," he repeated in his usual drawling tone, "what can you do for me?"

"Get you out of quod," replied Jenkins, with a knowing wink as he refilled his glass.

"Do you, then, know anybody who is likely to lend me five thousand guineas?" inquired Malpas, surveying the seedy-looking lawyer with an expression of mingled incredulity and supercilliousness.

"Not I indeed," returned Jenkins. "I suppose you would not pay the debt if you could; but would rather get out, snap your fingers at your creditor, run over to France, and make him take a farthing in the pound."

"But is it possible to manage this?" exclaimed Malpas, somewhat staggered by the air of decision which the attorney assumed.

"To be sure it is," was the still more positive response.

"And how?" demanded Malpas, looking and speaking more civilly.

"By bail," rejoined Mr. Jenkins: and he tossed off two glasses of wine in rapid succession.

"Ah! I have heard, by the bye, that something

could be done in this way," said Malpas, catching eagerly at the suggestion.

"To be sure it can," continued the attorney: then tapping his prominent nose with his very dirty forefinger, and looking what may be termed greasily knowing with his oily countenance, he said, "You are arrested on mesne process; and of course by putting in an appearance and plea you can keep off judgment. Well then, by appearing to the writ it is as much as to say that you mean to defend the action and go to trial; and by meaning to go to trial, you can put in bail in the interval. This is what is called *justifying:* and it's easy done now, as the bail would have to go before the Judge in chambers——"

"But I cannot get any two persons to put bail in for me to such an amount," observed Malpas. "Remember that I am detained here for five thousand guineas——"

"Well, and you must have two bail each able to prove himself worth ten thousand," returned Mr. Jenkins.

"Two men worth twenty thousand guineas between them!" ejaculated Malpas, in despair. "I cannot obtain such security."

"But I can," said Mr. Jenkins, slily and drily.

"You can?" ejaculated Malpas, starting with joy.

"Yes — to be sure," responded Jenkins. "In fact, I brought in with me just now a couple of bail for you to look at: and I think they are just the very thing."

"Good heavens!" cried the Colonel, in amazement: "do you inspect bail in the Bench just as you do horses at Tattersall's?"

"Aye—and a precious sight keener too, when you want to see whether they will pass muster," said Mr. Jenkins. "So if you like to give me a hundred guineas—that is to say, forty for each of the bail to put in their pockets, and twenty for myself—the job shall be done; and in less than a week you shall be out."

"But is it possible," cried the Colonel, more and more bewildered, "that any two wealthy gentlemen, worth ten thousand guineas each, can be moved by such a paltry consideration as forty pounds, to incur so vast a risk on my account?"

"O yes," said Mr. Jenkins, with a peculiar smile: "the two chaps that I have got along with me here this evening, would bail the devil if he would only pay them for it."

"You surprise me!" cried the Colonel. "But where are these two immensely rich money-making gentlemen?"

"I left them in the Tap, eating bread and cheese and onions: and I paid for a pot of half-and-half for them to enjoy themselves," coolly answered Mr. Joshua Jenkins.

The Colonel started with the sudden indignation of one who thought he was being bantered: but as a sudden idea struck him and the real truth flashed to his comprehension, he said, "I suppose then that these people are what you call *straw bail?*"

"Just so," replied Mr. Jenkins. "I am astonished you did not twig it all along. Lord bless you, it's as easily done as possible. I'll give you a proof. About a year ago a nobleman owing three thousand pounds was arrested by Simon the money-lender up at the West End. The nobleman's father offered Simon fifteen shillings in the pound: but Simon obstinately refused anything less than the whole. Well, so the nobleman sent for me. I dressed up a tinker and a dog's-meat-man in fine clothes—paid their rates and taxes for them—took them up before a Judge—made them swear they were each worth six thousand pounds—and so justified bail for the young nobleman. He was let out and bolted to Guernsey, where he remained while I made terms with Simon for him. And now, sir, how much do you think that Simon was glad to take after all?"

"I really can't say," returned Malpas: "perhaps seven and sixpence in the pound?"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Mr. Jenkins. "I made him take five farthings in the pound and stand a bottle of wine into the bargain. So you see how easy these kind of things can be done."

"I do indeed," replied the Colonel. "But is it possible that the Judge could be so easily duped?"

"Not he!" exclaimed the attorney. "His lordship knows devilish well that when bail go up to justify for ten thousand pounds, they are not really worth ten pence: he knows too that the very clothes they wear at the time are only lent them for the occasion:—but he is obliged to take their oaths that they are worth so much, provided the solicitor on the other side can't show the contrary. And we take devilish good care, Colonel, that nothing of the kind *shall* be shown at all! Why, would you believe it, I have had that tinker and that dog's-meat-man up for bail so often, any time during these last fourteen years, that their faces are as well known to every one of the Judges and every one of the Judges' Clerks, as they are to me or to their own wives: and it is really quite amusing to see how solemnly the Judge always looks these fellows in the face, as if he had never seen them before in all his life, and how he appears to take in as gospel all they tell him about their immense resources. But I don't always take up the same bail: that would be coming it rather too strong—particularly as there is always something different as to their profession or trade every time they do go up. I have got a dog-fancier—I might even call him a dog-stealer, without telling a lie—and he's a capital bail, with the impudence of brass. The week before last he went up, and the Judge says, '*Well, sir, what are you?*'—'*A merchant, my lud,*' was the prompt answer: and then he went on to describe of what his merchandize consisted, heaping together more silks, brocades, and costly stuffs than you read of in the Arabian Nights. Well, last week he went up again; and it happened to be the same Judge in chambers. '*Now, sir, what are you?*' asked the Judge, looking for all the world as if he had never seen such a face before.—'*I am a farmer and grazier in Scotland, my lud,*' was the dog-fancier's instantaneous reply: and he went on to describe the thousand head of cattle that grazed upon his hills, and the ten thousand sheep that fed upon his pastures. So of course it was all right again. Well, at the beginning of this week I took him up once more; and it happened to be the very self-same Judge as on the two former occasions. '*Now, sir, what are you?*' asked his lordship, so polite and civil as if he no more saw through the dodge than the babe unborn.—'*I am an Oporto wine-merchant, my lud,*' replied the dog-fancier, coolly; and he went on to

describe how he had got fifty pipes of Port wine in the Channel Islands, ready for the English market, and how he had already refused sixty guineas a-piece for them. Of course he was accepted: and so you see, Colonel Malpas, that I am pretty successful in the bail that I take up. In fact, I can give you plenty of references to prove that I am the best Straw Bail Agent in London. And now, with your permission, I'll ring the bell for another pint of wine."

No sooner said than done: the wine was brought—and while Mr. Joshua Jenkins discussed it, the bargain was confirmed relative to the bail by the Colonel paying twenty guineas down and agreeing to deposit eighty more in the hands of the master of the coffee-house, to be duly handed over to Mr. Jenkins aforesaid on the bail passing the scutiny of the Judge. Mr. Jenkins then took his leave; and Colonel Malpas remained for a short time alone, to ponder over the singular statements he had heard from the lips of the lawyer.

But in a few minutes the door was suddenly burst open; and five or six individuals, of shabby genteel appearance, rushed one upon the heels of another into the Wine-room. They evidently thought that this noisy and unceremonious mode of entrance was highly diverting—for they laughed boisterously, as they flung themselves upon the benches at the table nearest to that where the Colonel was sitting.

Almost immediately afterwards the waiter made his appearance, saying, "Now, genelmen, give your orders"—but in a tone which showed that he did not highly admire his customers.

"Well, what shall it be?" cried one, appealing to his companions.

"Oh!" glasses of negus round," said another. "There are six of us. Come, waiter—half-a-dozen glasses of negus. Look sharp!"

"O yes, sir, I am looking sharp enough," responded the waiter: "but I want to see the money before I serve the lush."

"What cursed infernal impudence!" ejaculated the one who had first spoken. "Who the devil ever thinks of asking a gentleman for money? For my part," he added, "I have left my purse up in my room—which is deuced imprudent, by the bye, seeing it is full of gold and bank-notes."

"And as for my purse," remarked another of the delectable party, fumbling in his pocket, "it has got through a hole down into the linings of my breeches, and I sha'n't be able to fish it up until I take my small-clothes off. It's deuced provoking: for I've got at least five pounds of small change in it, and should have been delighted to stand treat."

"Well, upon my word, we seem to be out of luck," exclaimed the third member of the party: "for I've got nothing but a bank-note for a hundred guineas," he continued, drawing out an old brown silk purse with a playbill rustling in one end: "and there's no chance of getting change for such a heavy piece of flimsey in this place to-night."

"Deuce take it!" cried the fourth: "if I had known that you were all exposed to such inconveniences as these, I would not have lent that twenty guineas just now to Lord Smigsmag. But really it was impossible to refuse his lordship under the circumstances."

"Oh!" exclaimed the fifth: "don't make yourselves uneasy, I've got plenty of money about me!"—and thus speaking, he thrust his hands with all confidence into his breeches' pocket: then suddenly starting as if alarmed by a chimney falling or a cry of *fire*, he vociferated, "By heavens! I have lost my purse—I have lost my purse!"—and he affected to be in a tremendous rage.

"Now, was there ever anything so regularly unfortunate?" exclaimed the sixth member of this precious group, drawing forth the remains of a cheque-book from which a great number of drafts had been cut out. "Here am I, not only able but also willing to write you a cheque for a cool hundred or two, just as you like: but now it is after business hours in Lombard Street—and so it's all the same as if I had not a twopenny-piece in all the world at my banker's."

"Well, it raly is wery provoking," exclaimed the waiter, with a covert sarcasm in his tone, "to see six genelmen all so well-to-do in their circumstances and so full of blunt as you are, and not able just at this present speaking to raise six shillings between you all."

"It *is* provoking—very," said one of the party, looking full at Malpas; "and if I knew any body who would just lend me as much as six shillings till to-morrow morning, I would send them into him with my card and a note of thanks just as he sate down to his breakfast."

The Colonel, who was too wide-awake not to see through the characters of the six gentlemen, made no remark, and indeed affected not to observe that any hint had been thrown out towards himself.

"Did you speak, sir?" said the foremost of the party, now boldly addressing the Colonel, but with a very bland look and polite bow.

"No, sir—I said nothing," replied Malpas, somewhat sulkily.

"There — by heavens! the gentleman is a trump," vociferated the previous speaker: "he offers to treat us to glasses of negus round! Come, waiter, look alive: the gentleman is anxious to pay his footing—and we are anxious to drink his health."

The Colonel was so taken aback by the cool impudence of this proceeding, that he could not return a negative to the inquiring look which the waiter threw upon him: and this functionary, acting upon the principle that silence gives consent, at once shuffled away to execute the order.

"New-comer, sir?" said one of the party to the Colonel.

"Yes—I am sorry to say so," responded Malpas, not deeming it prudent to treat his fellow-prisoners with any marked coolness.

"Going to stay here long?" asked another.

"In for much?" blandly inquired a third.

"Going through the Court?" mildly asked a fourth.

"Or going to bail out?" said a fifth.

"If you stay here any time," observed the sixth, "you'll want a room. Now, as there are only about a hundred and twenty rooms in the place, each not large enough to swing a cat in, and seven hundred prisoners to live in them all, it's rather a difficult thing to get a room to one's self at any price. But as you seem to be a regular gentleman and are standing this negus in so handsome a manner

I shouldn't mind letting you have *my* room for about a couple of guineas a week."

But before the Colonel had leisure to answer a single one of the above questions, or give any reply to the proposal concerning the room, the waiter made his appearance with the negus; and the conversation thereupon seemed to take a new impulse and flow into a variety of other channels.

"Now, my good fellow," said the foremost of the party, addressing himself to the Colonel in terms as familiar as if he had known him from childhood, —"while drinking your health I must beg of you not to take on too much on account of this imprisonment. Lord bless you! it's nothing when you are accustomed to it! Look at me now."

Colonel Malpas did as he was desired, but could not help thinking that there was nothing very agreeable or pleasant to contemplate in the appearance of a bloated, dissipated, rakish-looking fellow, with long dry dirty hair, and linen that seemed to imply that he had forfeited the confidence of his washerwoman.

"Well, you see me?" continued this individual: "and such as you see me, so I am," he added, thus enunciating a self-evident proposition. "I am just twenty-seven years old, and I've been six years in this place. When I came of age I had twenty thousand pounds, all of which I spent in nine months. For three months I played at hide and seek—then I got taken and locked up here—and here I've been ever since, and am likely to remain God knows how much longer. That's what I call life:"—and he burst out into a fit of uproarious laughter, in which his five companions as boisterously joined.

"Well, I've seen a little of life too," remarked the second. "When I came of age I had a thousand pounds, and made everybody believe that I had got a fortune of fifty thousand. So I lived in glorious style—got into debt as much as people would let me — kept hunters, race-horses, and hounds—drove my four-in-hand—gave champagne parties—had a town-house, a country-house, a crib down at Newmarket, another at Melton, and a shooting-box in the Highlands—and thus kept up a roaring game for two years. At last the smash came. Everthing went to the dogs—and I was brought over here. That was eight years ago: and here I've been ever since. Now, wasn't that a lark?" he exclaimed, laughing most joyously at this unblushing revelation of his rascality, while his boon companions joined in his mirth.

"Well, I did even better than that," said the third: "for when I came of age I hadn't a blessed farthing in the world. But I bought a precious large pair of whiskers and mustachios in the Burlington Arcade—clapped a long jingling pair of spurs upon my heels—wore a frogged coat—stuck my hat jauntily over my right ear—and called myself *Captain*. Thus decorated personally and titularly, I took up my abode at Long's Hotel and lived in the most sumptuous manner. The fashionable jewellers were delighted to supply *the Captain* with all he wanted in the shape of watches, chains, rings, and so on: and *the Captain* borrowed their full value on them from that accommodating relative—*his uncle*. Things went on well enough in this manner for nearly a twelvemonth; and I was on the point of marrying an heiress with a hundred thousand pounds, when the very night before the happy morning, I unfortunately left my pocket-book behind at the house of my intended. Her papa and mamma—like prying old folks as they were — could not resist the curiosity of peeping inside, just to catch a glimpse of *the Captain's* little secrets: when, lo and behold! to their astonishment and dismay, they found the said pocket-book crammed with pawnbrokers' duplicates. Early next morning—just as I was dressing for my bridal—not having previously missed the pocket-book, nor suspecting the storm which was about to burst over my head,—a parcel was put into my hand by the head waiter at Long's. I tore it open—and out dropped the fatal pocket-book, accompanied by a note from my intended's papa, couched in terms which always make me feel very uncomfortable when I think of them. Of course it was all up with the matrimonial scheme: the landlord of Long's arrested me for my bill—I was brought to the Bench—and here I have been vegetating for the last four years. How the devil I shall ever get out—not daring to face all those jewellers in the Insolvent's Court—I really don't know—nor yet particularly care:"—and this conclusive observation was the signal for another uproarious burst of laughter.

"Ah! my career was equally short—perhaps not so brilliant—and most assuredly ten thousand times more foolish," exclaimed the fourth of this delectable party, when the laughter had again subsided. "On coming of age I received thirty thousand pounds of my own fortune, and married a young lady who had fifty thousand pounds as her fortune. But within three months after this marriage I was introduced to Madame Profligata, the celebrated actress: and though she is not half so good-looking as my own wife, yet I was fool enough to fancy that it was a very grand thing to have such a woman as my mistress. I accordingly made overtures, and came to an agreement to allow her a house, carriage, and five hundred a-year: but the very day after she was installed in her new dwelling, she told me that she could not possibly stir out for want of diamonds. I accordingly sent to the most fashionable jeweller to bring up some sets of brilliants; and I offered Madame a present of gems valued at about a thousand guineas. Thereupon she burst out laughing in my face, and told me if I meant to do things in a chandler's shop style we had better cut it at once. I trembled at the idea of being ridiculed before all the world by losing my mistress for such a trifle, and therefore allowed her to select diamonds to the amount of six thousand guineas. To be brief, Madame required so many valuables of all descriptions—had so many long-standing debts which must be paid—and went out shopping so incessantly—that in less than three months she positively wheedled me out of twenty thousand pounds. Her extravagance grew more unbounded as she perceived that I was soft and yielding; so that before we had been a-year together she had swallowed up not only my own fortune, but also my wife's. And now, speaking of my wife, I may as well state that she returned home to her friends, while I lived altogether with Madame. All my ready cash being gone, my insatiate mistress taught me how to raise money upon bills: and strange—almost incredible as it may seem—I negotiated in one year my own acceptances to the tune of eighty thousand guineas, for which all the value that we obtained was about three thousand in money — ten thousand in wine, which no-

body could drink—to the thousand in pictures, the veriest of daubs—and all the rest was absorbed in what was called *discount* and *commission*. At last, when my name was so regularly worn out that not a discounter would look at it, Madame picked a quarrel with me, and we parted. The very next day I heard that she had picked up another flat whom she took to live with her. As for myself, being immediately arrested on some of the bills falling due, I was brought over to the Bench; and being uncommonly hard up, I pocketted my resentment against Madame, and wrote to her to lend me fifty pounds, as I happened to be well aware that she had received five thousand two days before from her new lover. But she laughed in my messenger's face, and told him to go about his business. To conclude, I have been three years in this place—and during that period have beheld the arrival, not only of the flat who succeeded me in the favours of Madame Profligata, but also of four others who during the interval have successively been her paramours and her dupes. But never mind," he exclaimed, assuming an air of jollity which was not after all quite natural: "we must take things as we find them, and fling care to the dogs!"

"Yes—that's the only maxim to be followed in a place like this," said the fifth individual. "I suppose we have all been very gay and very foolish in our time. For my part, although now only in my twenty-sixth year, I have run through three fortunes amounting altogether to a hundred and fifty thousand guineas. The first was left me by my grandfather—the second by an uncle—and the third by my father: but I had a mania for aristocratic acquaintances—and what with playing at dice with Dukes, at ecarté with Earls, at cribbage with Counts, and billiards with Baronets, I got so completely plucked that I at last found myself here, and not a feather to fly with."

"And I suppose not one of your fine acquaintances has ever been in to see you?" observed the sixth individual. "Ah! that is just like them. Five years ago, on coming of age I inherited a fortune of fourteen thousands pounds; and a certain fashionable friend honoured me with an introduction to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. His Royal Highness, hearing I had come of age and inherited property which was at my own disposal, was pleased to smile upon me most graciously. The next gracious mark of the princely favour was a very gracious invitation to a select supper at Carlton House, where I was introduced to five or six of his Royal Highness's boon companions. After supper his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to propose dice; and while playing with me, I could not help noticing that his Royal Highness was no mean adept at securing a die—or in other words, cheating most flagrantly. But who could tell a Prince that he was a downright sharper—especially such a gracious Prince as that, who robbed you before your very eyes in a style so well becoming the first gentleman in Europe! As a matter of course I submitted with the best possible grace to be thus graciously fleeced of all I possessed: and after five or six select little suppers at Carlton House, I was as thoroughly cleaned out by that same gracious Prince as it was possible for man to be. Finding myself thus agreeably and pleasantly ruined, and calling to mind the numerous promises which his Royal Highness had so graciously made to provide for me, I ventured to call at Carlton House and explain my exact position to that gracious Prince. He listened with his wonted suavity of look while I frankly declared how penniless I was and besought him to lose no time in fulfilling his generous intentions by bestowing a situation upon me. '*And so you have got no more money?*' his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to observe.—'*Not a farthing, sir,*' I answered.—'*Then, damn your eyes,*' he exclaimed, becoming quite purple in the face, '*what the devil business have you here?*'—and turning upon his heel, he rang the bell for me to be shown out. Reduced to despair by this proceeding, and being painfully brought to the conviction that his Royal Highness was the most ungracious Prince in the world, I plunged headlong into all kinds of dissipation to drown care. Dissipation led to extravagance—extravagance to debt—and debt to the King's Bench, where I have been for the last four years, and mean to stop because I *can* manage to pick up a guinea by hook or by crook within these walls, which I should be somewhat puzzled to do outside."

Our readers will not have failed to observe that despite all their previous blusterings, vapourings, and boastings about well-filled purses, lost purses, lent money, cheque-books, and so forth, the half-dozen gentlemen really and truly were reduced to the sad alternative of living upon their wits, even within the walls of a debtor's gaol, where it might be thought that every body's wits were too sharp to permit the possibility of being lived upon by any save their owners. It will likewise have been observed that when once the half dozen comrades had induced the Colonel to treat them to the negus—or rather, had succeeded in obtaining it in his name—they very freely put him in possession of the incidents of their past lives. Finally, as their tales and conversation served to while away the Colonel's time, he encouraged their garrulity by a fresh supply of negus; and in this manner did the party continue chatting and drinking until eleven o'clock, when the lights were put out in the Coffee-room.

Malpas then went up to bed; and the six friends strolled forth "to make the tour of the whistling shops"—or in other words, to visit every room where gin (prohibited by the gaol-regulations) was sold on the sly.

CHAPTER LXIX.

A SCENE IN THE DARK.

We must now return to Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden, whom we left together in the dead of night and in the utter darkness of a chamber at the Prefecture of Police.

The reader will remember that the young lady declared it to be utterly impossible for her to pass through the opening into her own apartment: and it had been agreed that she was to remain in our hero's chamber until daylight should enable them to enlarge the aperture—for be it recollected that they dared not light the candles again after the peremptory command and undisguised menace of the watchman.

The moment Jocelyn thus found that it was an-

solutely necessary—or at least, to all appearances—that Laura should remain until dawn in his apartment, he again rose as it were superior to the perplexities of his situation; and in the calm and courteous tone of a gentleman who wishes to show that his aim is to observe the most delicate consideration towards a female-companion, he said, "Miss Linden, I pray you to use my couch as a sofa—and I will envelope myself in my cloak and repose in the arm-chair between the windows."

This observation was significant enough; inasmuch as the position which Loftus thus specified, and to which he at once felt his way in the dark, placed the whole length of the room between himself and Laura Linden. Accordingly, enveloping himself in his mantle, Loftus threw himself in the arm-chair: and for a few minutes a profound silence reigned in the apartment.

"Is not this a most romantic and singular adventure?" said Laura at length—in that low, tremulous, and half plaintive voice which is oft-times woman's most dangerous weapon, inasmuch as it steals insidiously into that heart from which the more boldly played artillery of other charms has innocuously rebounded.

"It is one of those incidents which are more frequently encountered in novels than in real life," answered Loftus, sorry in his heart that the previously prevailing silence was thus broken by renewed discourse: and at the same time it struck him that the young lady's voice had undergone some slight change since she had last spoken;—indeed a vague and undefined suspicion stole gradually into the breast of our young hero, that this voice, as he had last heard it, was not altogether unknown to him.

"What would the world think if it knew of this adventure?" continued Laura, her voice appearing as if it were passing from a previously feigned to a now more natural tone—as if she either forgo

that she had previously been disguising that voice somewhat, or as if she were now purposely allowing it to resume its wonted intonation.

"The world will never know from my lips any thing that might be disagreeable or unpleasant," observed Jocelyn, a vague feeling of uneasiness now coming over him as his suspicions relative to the voice grew stronger and stronger.

Not that he could yet call to mind where he had ever heard that voice before, even if he had really ever heard it at all until this night: but he was full certain that it was undergoing a gradual change from an assumed melody to its natural one.

"Ah! you do not think, Mr. Loftus," observed Laura, her voice becoming more tremulous, as if vibrating with some strong feeling or growing passion,—"you do not think that the world would give us credit for being such a good girl and boy as we really are? You fancy that the world, like a too suspicious parent, would be certain to believe that we have been naughty children?"

"Heavens, Miss Linden!" exclaimed Loftus, shocked at the gross indelicacy of the remark, and therefore speaking in a tone of unmistakable displeasure, "let us not talk in this strain! Indeed, unless you compose yourself to sleep, you will be thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and totally unfit to encounter all that we may have to accomplish to-morrow night."

"It is impossible to sleep with a strong current of air coming through this aperture," said Laura: and Jocelyn could hear by the elastic bound of her feet alighting upon the floor, that she had leapt from the couch.

"Permit me to do my best to stop that aperture," he said, rising from his seat and slowly advancing through the darkness towards the alcove. "Perhaps I can replace the panel of the wainscot in such a manner as to protect you from the draught."

"I do not believe it possible," said Laura, in a tone which evidently came from lips that were pouting with subdued ill-humour at the moment.

"Then let us light a candle at any risk——"

"Ah! doubtless for you to see my face, now that you know the veil is off!" she cried, with a merry laugh.

"I can assure you, Miss Linden, that I have no impertinent curiosity of such a nature," answered Jocelyn, in a voice coldly expressive of displeasure.

"Oh! no, no," ejaculated Laura, her humour suddenly changing again—and this time into a bitterness which she did not attempt to conceal: "you have no curiosity of any kind, Mr. Loftus—your heart is ice—ice to the very core! I declare that it is almost an insult to a young and beautiful woman, as I am, that you have not spoken to me a single word such as young gentlemen *do* speak to young ladies! There—you know what I mean—but I cannot explain myself any better. At all events, I feel slighted—neglected! Why don't you answer me, sir?" she exclaimed, with a petulance almost amounting to rage as she stamped her foot upon the floor.

"Heavens! what a little demoness," thought Jocelyn within himself: but in a cold and apparently unmoved manner, he said, "Miss Linden, you thanked me just now for the brotherly kindness which, as you were pleased to observe, I manifested towards you when you felt unwell: and therefore you will perceive the inconsistency of at present accusing me of deliberately slighting you."

"Answer me one question, sir," exclaimed Laura, hastily and impetuously: "do you wish to escape hence?"

"Most assuredly," replied Loftus. "But wherefore a question, so singular under the circumstances?"

"Because you cannot escape without my assistance," returned Laura: "and that assistance you are not so certain of having as you were just now."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Loftus, bewildered and chagrined: "is it possible that I have really offended you?"

"I have already told you," said Laura, in a voice that again became low, deep, and tremulous,—but whether with real or affected emotion Jocelyn knew not,—"I have already told you that men of the highest rank and most brilliant position have besieged me with their overtures—some upon honourable terms, others upon dishonourable—and while I have spurned the latter, I have steadily refused the former. But wherefore? Because in my own heart, I had already conjured up the ideal image of such a being as alone could win my love! To that idealism have I clung: it has been to me a dream and a worship—until at last I have felt that my very happiness depended upon its realization. I have pondered and pondered upon that image until I have led myself as it were to become desperately enamoured of it—and I have vowed that never never, would I bestow my affections upon any one who did not realize in his person and his mind all that was beautiful, attractive, and endearing in that creation of my fancy. Conceive, then, my astonishment and my delight, when on passing ere now into this chamber, I beheld in *you* the personification of that delicious idealism!"

"Miss Linden, not another word—not another syllable in this strain, I conjure—I command you!" cried Loftus, in a tone but too plainly indicative of outraged feeling. "This scene reminds me of temptations, arts, and wiles to which I was exposed ere my captivity: and did I not believe that the three ladies to whom I now allude are far, far away from Paris, I should actually fancy that you were one of them," he added vehemently. "Therefore, Miss Linden, for heaven's sake, let us have no more of a scene which in truth is as derogatory to you as it is painful and revolting to me!"

"Mr. Loftus," interrupted Laura, suddenly assuming a tone of decision,—"I see that it is now necessary we should thoroughly understand each other: for you are more flinty-hearted than I had at first imagined."

"Yes — let us understand each other," said Loftus,—"since it would seem that we had mistaken each other's character,—I, in believing that you were a young lady of discretion as well as magnanimity—and you in supposing that I am unmindful of my duty alike to you and to myself."

"Oh! that we had a light!" exclaimed Laura Linden, sarcastically,—"so that I might see your contenance flushing with the virtuous indignation that is doubtless now reddening it."

"But for the explanations?" said Loftus, impetuously.

"They will soon be given, so far as I am concerned," answered Laura. "Anxious and longing

as I have been to effect my escape hence, yet that aspiration has now become secondary indeed to another hope which I have conceived, and on the fulfilment of which the former shall even be made to depend. For I am self-willed, Mr. Loftus,—yes, self-willed and headstrong as I am petulant and impetuous: and therefore you must know, in one word that I love you—and that if you scorn this love of mine, it shall turn to the bitterest hatred!"

"Miss Linden," observed Loftus, coldly indignant,—"you will provoke me to say things to which I should be sorry to give utterance."

"Mr. Loftus, if you mean war to the death, then war let it be!" cried Miss Linden: "but in that case, remember that I shall not hesitate to sacrifice myself in order to be revenged on you. I will therefore confess to the Prefect's servant in the morning all the preparations for escape which have been made——"

"Foolish young woman! you will draw down a terrible punishment upon yourself," ejaculated Loftus. "You will perhaps be moved to another and far more dreadful prison——"

"What of all that, so long as I gratify my revenge?" exclaimed Laura. "It is for you to decide whether you will provoke that vengeance,—whether you will continue to scorn, slight, and even insult me—or whether you will consent to gratify this whim I have conceived by becoming my lover for a week—a day—or only an hour, as you may choose? O Mr. Loftus, do not remain thus hard-hearted!—remember that I am beautiful—very beautiful—and the world will know naught of what takes place between us in an hour of yielding tenderness——"

"Temptress, who art thou?" exclaimed Jocelyn, now becoming angry and almost enraged: "thy voice is familiar to me—I am certain I have heard it before——"

"Yes," interrupted Laura, in a low tone: "and I have seen thee before—and I know more of thee than thou thinkest—and I could breathe in thy ear the name which ought to have been in the passport——"

"Then, who art thou?—tell me who thou art!" exclaimed our young hero, becoming more and more excited: "for there is something so strange—so mysterious in all this——"

"Stay—let me whisper a word to your ear," said Laura; "and you will then see that I know everything concerning you——"

"Speak aloud, Miss Linden!" cried Jocelyn, who perceived by the rustling of her dress that she was approaching him through the pitchy darkness which prevailed.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" she exclaimed, scornfully. "Oh! what sickly sentimentalism—what a maudlin affectation of virtue is all this! Even the beauteous Louisa Stanley herself," she continued with a marked accentuation upon a name which made Jocelyn start suddenly,—"could scarce think well of one who seems not to be made of flesh and blood!"

"You have alluded to a young lady," said Loftus, "whose example it were well, Miss Linden, if you would follow. But let me beseech and implore you to put an end to a scene as derogatory as it is painful—as humiliating as it is ridiculous!"

There was a dead silence of nearly a minute: and then the lady's voice suddenly vibrated upon Jocelyn's ear, exclaiming, "Oh! I love thee—I love thee!"—and the next instant he heard her come bounding towards him like a serpent flinging its coils through the utter darkness at some object which a mysterious instinct impelled it to seize upon: so that ere Jocelyn had leisure to step back even a couple of paces, he was clasped in the arms of his midnight companion.

Violent was that embrace, as if the young lady's impassioned nature were wrought up to a frenzied pitch. The plump white arms were thrown so suddenly around his neck and held him in so firm a clasp, and the lips of the temptress were instantaneously glued to his own with so burning an intenseness, that it seemed as if it were impossible for him to escape from the empire of such an amazonian assailant. But immediately recovering his presence of mind, he endeavoured to disengage himself from her embrace, in which however she held him with all the greater tenacity. He used a little more violence—and then she clung to him with the force of desperation.

"Miss Linden—take care—I shall do you a mischief!" cried Jocelyn.

"You would not ill-use a woman," replied Laura: and she covered his face with frantic kisses, as if hurried away by the torrent of raging passions which she could not control.

"By heaven, this is intolerable!" cried Jocelyn. "O shameless young woman!"

"Ah! revile—abuse me as you will," said Laura, with a triumphant tone: "but I will either perish, or compel you to fall vanquished into the arms of my consummated desires!"

"You force me to extremes!" cried Loftus, now seizing both her arms and somewhat violently disengaging them from about his neck.

Laura struggled desperately to retain her hold—and Jocelyn could hear her gasping and moaning with rage, like a subdued tigress, when she found herself baffled and defeated in the conflict. But be it well understood that he exhibited not the slightest unnecessary violence towards her: he merely put forth his strength to a sufficient degree to unlock her arms from his neck. The struggle was nevertheless a difficult one, inasmuch as it took place in the depth of a pitchy darkness: and it was therefore no fault of our hero's, if Laura, suddenly tripping over a rug, fell heavily upon the floor—where she remained senseless.

For a few moments Loftus, though deeply grieved at this incident, fancied that her immoveability and silence were only a pretence: but finding that she continued thus still and speechless, he stooped down and laid his hand upon her forehead. It was cold—and there was a clammy perspiration upon it. Beginning to be seriously alarmed, he placed his hand upon her heart, and felt that though it beat, the pulsation was nevertheless slow and feeble. A mortal terror now seized upon him—for he feared that she might be in reality seriously injured and perhaps about to die; and for a few instants he felt so bewildered as scarcely to know what course to pursue.

But suddenly it struck him that under such circumstances he must not hesitate to procure a light at any risk. The resolve was adopted and executed—tinder, flint, steel, and matches were at hand—in another moment they were put into

requisition—and he accordingly at once proceeded to strike a light.

The candle was lighted—he held it over the countenance of the lady who was stretched upon the floor—and an ejaculation burst from his lips! Heavens—was it indeed possible?—and was the half-suspicion which he had ere now expressed, so signally confirmed?

But at that ejaculation which thrilled from his lips, the lady herself opened her eyes—looked up—and then gave vent to a wild cry of mingled disappointment, rage, and terror: for she saw that detection had overtaken her sooner than she had purposed or anticipated;—and thus did accident reveal to Jocelyn Loftus the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though beautiful Julia Owen!

CHAPTER LXX.

THE PREFECT AND HIS GUESTS.

We must now inform our readers that on this same memorable night when Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden—*alias* Julia Owen—were thrown together, the Prefect of Police entertained a few special friends at a choice supper in the saloon belonging to his own magnificent suite of apartments.

The Prefect himself was in uniform, he having attended the Legislative Assembly that day in his ministerial capacity; and the gentlemen whom he was thus regaling with the elegant little banquet, consisted of his own two Private Secretaries, the Under-Secretary of State for the Department of the Interior, and three well-dressed young men who had no ostensible profession nor any visible sources of income, but who nevertheless lived well and cut an excellent figure in the French metropolis. In plain terms, these last mentioned individuals were pensioned spies, or *mouchards*, secretly attached to the Prefecture of Police.

We need hardly say that all the guests thus assembled were Frenchmen; and the conversation flagged not during the meal, as it usually does with Englishmen when similarly employed. On the contrary, the gastronomic proficiency of the Prefect's cook, displayed as it was in substantial specimens of the art now served up on massive silver dishes, afforded not only delicious food for the palate but also for the discourse. The wines were of the most exquisite description and circulated freely: but with true French refinement in epicurean indulgence and epicurean luxuriousness, the party lingered a long time over the banquet, drinking the healths of all the most beautiful women of the day, and pledging each other with brimming glasses and fervid pressures of the hand, in the true French style of cordial, heartfelt conviviality. Now, as it was eleven o'clock before this festival commenced, it was some time past midnight ere it terminated. The Prefect and his companions then passed into an adjoining saloon where the table was spread with a choice dessert—another and still more rare selection of wines—coffee—and burnt punch.

"I thought, my dear friend," said the Under-Secretary of the Interior, addressing the Prefect of Police, "that you promised to have that enormously rich English nobleman, the Marquis of Leveson, here to-night?"

"Such was my intention," responded the Prefect; "and I believe it will yet be fulfilled. The Marquis would have joined us earlier, but is obliged to be at the ball given by the British Ambassador to-night. He however promised that he would get away soon after twelve and then come and join us——"

"Is he making a long stay in Paris?" asked the Under-Secretary of State, whose name was Jules Martignac.

"He has been here about a fortnight, on business of a somewhat particular and delicate nature," returned the Prefect, with a meaning smile.

"No doubt M. Jules Martignac is as well acquainted with that business as ourselves," observed one of the Prefect's Private Secretaries.

"No, indeed I am not," exclaimed the Under-Secretary of State. "Of course I could be if I chose, inasmuch as there are no secrets at the Prefecture which are not known at the Ministry of the Interior. But to tell you the truth, I have been so very gay lately——"

"Ah! Jules, you have doubtless found a new mistress!" exclaimed the Prefect, laughing. "But was there ever such inconstancy as yours!"

"It is not in my nature to remain long faithful to any woman," observed Martignac, who was as vain and conceited as he was really handsome in person and elegant in manners. "But I was telling you that I have not lately had time to look over the secret reports from the Prefecture to the Ministry of the Interior—and therefore I am not entirely acquainted with the object of Lord Leveson's visit to Paris. An inkling thereof I have gleaned, it is true, from what has been said in my presence on two or three occasions, by the Minister and his Confidential Secretary——"

"Well," exclaimed the Prefect, who from the first moment he sate down to table with his friends, had thrown off all official reserve, and who now laughed heartily at the thoughts which the present discourse had conjured up in his mind,—"with regard to Lord Leveson's visit to Paris, I can safely say that of all the amusing incidents which ever came to my knowledge, certain matters involved in this affair are the most eminently diverting!"

"I presume his lordship's visit to our gay capital," said Jules Martignac, "is in some way or another connected with the mission of those three young English ladies—the Misses Owen, I mean—who were appointed to proceed to Italy in order to occupy certain situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline?"

"That is to say, the wife of the present Prince Regent of England," added one of the gentlemen-spies.

"Precisely so," continued the Prefect. "Well, and then these three girls—these Misses Owen—fall in with a certain young gentleman calling himself Jocelyn Loftus: and he, with more generous candour than astute discretion, tells them in plain terms that he has embarked in the Quixotic enterprise of thwarting all their schemes and preventing them from proceeding to Italy to fulfil their mission."

"The insensate Englishman!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "But after all, whether he had thus revealed his purposes to the young ladies, or not, would scarcely have signified in the long run: for the mo-

ment he set foot in Paris, every act and proceeding on his part was sure to become known to the authorities and be duly chronicled in the *Black Books* at the Prefecture. Ah!" added the handsome but affected official, "what a blessing it is to have such a well-ramified system of police as we have got!"

"But you must observe in this case, Jules," said the Prefect, "that it was not my business to trouble myself about Mr. Jocelyn Loftus or the Misses Owen unless in pursuance of the special wish of certain parties in England: and such wish was speedily intimated to our government. I need not remind you, my friends, that at the restoration of his Majesty Louis XVIII to the French throne in April last, a secret compact was made between this august monarch and the illustrious Prince Regent of England, to the effect that they should mutually forward, advance, and succour each other's interests, aims, and purposes to the utmost of their power. Hence it followed as a matter of course, that whatever project the Prince Regent of England might put in force with regard to his wife now in Italy, was certain to be privately aided and abetted by the government of his Majesty Louis XVIII. Now, when Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, with more candour than discretion, made known his chivalrous designs to the three Misses Owen, they at once wrote off to England for instructions: and the immediate consequence was a private communication from the Prince Regent to our own most gracious Sovereign, requesting that the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus might be immediately arrested and detained in some secure place. As a matter of course, our excellent King, mindful of his compact with the Prince Regent, lost no time in complying with the demand: and the order to take the necessary steps in the matter was forthwith sent to me from the palace. Hereupon, I lost no time in causing the young man passing under the name of Loftus to be apprehended, on the ground that he was residing in France with a passport made out in a false name."

"And did not the police agent take possession of all the young Englishman's papers at Meurice's Hotel?" inquired Jules Martignac. "Methinks I heard something of the sort mentioned at the Ministry of the Interior——"

"As a matter of course," replied the Prefect: "all his correspondence was taken possession of and brought hither. The contents of those letters were not however very important, chiefly tending to show that Mr. Loftus was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, who resides at Canterbury——"

"Ah! that's the capital of the beautiful county of Kent," exclaimed Jules Martignac. "For you know that I have visited England? Well, and I have passed a few days in that fine old city of Canterbury. Its cathedral is sublime! But pray proceed. What else did the letters and papers show?"

"That there was a Miss Mary Owen — the youngest sister of the girls whom we have already been speaking of——"

"Well—what of this Mary Owen?"

"Simply that she had run away from home, I believe—or else deserted her mother and sisters in some peculiar manner—and had found a refuge with that same Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. These were the principal points developed by the letters and papers seized at Meurice's Hotel," continued the Prefect: "and not knowing how serviceable they might prove, I at once despatched them all to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent in London."

"But the three Owens who were on their way to Italy," inquired Martignac,—"have they not continued their journey?"

"Two of them have," responded the Prefect: "and have joined her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales by this time. They travelled under the escort of a certain Mrs. Ranger, who had charge of them——"

"But first, your Excellency should recollect," exclaimed one of the Prefect's Private Secretaries, "that even after the arrival of the instructions from England to arrest Mr. Loftus, it was deemed advisable that the three sisters should remain in Paris a few days, so as to await any fresh commands from England that might follow after the receipt of the letters and papers which were sent over to the Prince Regent."

"Exactly so," observed the Prefect: "and in due course the Marquis of Leveson came over himself."

"The London papers hinted at the time," remarked one of the gentlemen-spies, "that his lordship left England so suddenly to be out of the way while his niece's husband—a profligate fellow of the name of Dysart — was tried and hung. The statement was copied into all the French papers——"

"To be sure!" exclaimed the Prefect. "It was an excellent excuse for his lordship's sudden departure from England and visit to Paris. But I can assure you, from what I have heard the Marquis himself say, that he felt not the slightest sympathy on account of his niece's husband: and *we* know that his lordship really came over to Paris about this affair of the Owens and Jocelyn Loftus. Well, the day after his arrival he sent the two eldest young ladies —Miss Agatha and Miss Emma, I think their names are—he sent them, I say, post-haste forward on their journey to Italy, along with Mrs. Ranger. But he kept the youngest of the three girls, whose name is Julia——"

"I thought you just now said *Mary*," observed Jules Martignac.

"No, no," replied the Prefect. "Mary is the youngest of *all*, and is living with Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. It is Julia, the youngest of the *three over in France*, whom the Marquis kept with him."

"The wicked old fellow!" exclaimed Jules. "But I have heard that these Owen girls are ravishingly beautiful——"

"True! But you are quite wrong in your present suspicions," interrupted the Prefect: "for the very same day that Miss Agatha and Miss Emma departed for Italy, Miss Julia was consigned a prisoner to the Prefecture——"

"Ha! ha! capital—was it not?" exclaimed the three gentlemen-spies and the two Private Secretaries, all rubbing their hands with the air of men who were relishing an excellent joke. "Only fancy that sweet pretty girl Julia Owen, being locked up in a gloomy room in the Prefecture!"

"Indeed! and what was that for?" demanded Jules Martignac, now completely at fault as to the meaning and motive of the circumstances just related.

"You must know in the first place," said one of

the gentlemen-spies with a peculiar look, "that it was entirely of her own accord."

"And after full deliberation with Lord Leveson," observed another of the *mouchards*.

"And it must be borne in mind that the room in which she is placed," added the third spy, "is next to that of the handsome young Englishman who chooses to pass under the very euphonious and romantic name of Jocelyn Loftus."

"By all means tell us about this!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "It seems to be one of the most thoroughly romantic affairs I ever heard of"

"Well," said the Prefect, now resuming the discourse, "I must observe, *en passant*, that the English people, with the disgusting pride and arrogant self-conceit that is so natural to them, are exceedingly fond of denouncing the French as being utterly demoralized: but from the very incidents of which we are speaking, and a variety of others which have come to my knowledge, I can assure you my candid and honest impression is that the aristocratic and higher classes of English society are the most depraved, profligate, and licentious in all the world."

"But the affair of this Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus?" exclaimed Jules Martignac, who did not want a lecture upon morals: "is it so very racy?"

"You shall judge for yourself," replied the Prefect. "It appears that this same young gentleman whom we shall still continue to call by his pseudonym of Jocelyn Loftus, professes a stoical degree of virtue which has naturally given great offence in certain quarters, where licentiousness is thereby put to the blush. Now, when the Marquis of Leveson came over to Paris, it was privately whispered in his ear by Mrs. Ranger, that all the three sisters had become desperately enamoured of Jocelyn—but that Agatha and Emma had vainly attempted to thaw his ice-cold heart. The Marquis, having a particular reason for breaking down all the ridiculous scruples which have taken such a hold upon Loftus, became much interested in what Mrs. Ranger told him; and summoning the three sisters, he succeeded in wheedling out of the two eldest a confession of all the wiles, manœuvres, and artifices which they had adopted to ensnare the object of their passion;—whi'e from young Julia's lips he elicited the avowal that she had not found an opportunity of trying the effect of *her* charms, but should rejoice at being enabled to enter on such a love-campaign. The mind of the Marquis was at once made up—his plans were settled—and he proceeded to put them into execution. Agatha and Emma were sent forward with Mrs. Ranger, as I have already told you, to join the Princess Caroline in Italy: and the Marquis then came to me with a request that Julia Owen might at once be placed in the next room to Jocelyn Loftus. As a matter of course his lordship explained his reasons for a proceeding which at the first glance struck even *me* as extraordinary. He represented how necessary it was to undermine that stoical virtue which led Jocelyn Loftus into such Quixotic extremes, and which would inevitably lead him, when he regained his liberty, not merely to thwart, but also blazon forth to the whole world the long-concerted plots and deeply-ramified intrigues that are now in progress relative to the Princess of Wales. It was quite clear, as the Marquis observed, that Jocelyn knew too much on that point; and the only way to render him powerless was to retain him in prison, or else drag him down from the pedestal of his exalted virtue. Now, to keep him for a very long time in custody would be to stand the risk of incurring great scandal: the thing might get mentioned by some Opposition Member in the Legislative Chamber; and the enemies of the government would make much of it. Therefore, as the Marquis reasoned, what scheme could be better than to inveigle the young man within the circle of those temptations to which he was more likely to become susceptible in a state of captivity than when free. '*He must be looked upon as a serpent whose sting is his* VIRTUE,' said the Marquis: '*let us rob him of that sting, and we render him powerless. We may thus defy him, whereas at present he is dangerous to a degree.*' Thus reasoned the Marquis of Leveson; and I not only understood his views, but cheerfully consented to assist them to the utmost of my power. Julia Owen was to be the temptress to allure the young man from the pinnacle of his lofty virtue: she was the sorceress whose spells were to entice him from the pedestal of his exalted chivalry. The first step in the singular drama was therefore to assign her to the chamber next to Jocelyn. This was done—and the girl entered with romantic delight upon the task, all the details and arrangements of which she promptly planned and chalked out. Knowing that it was vain to endeavour to work at once upon his animal passions, she resolved to appeal to his refined and delicate sentiments. She therefore purposed to introduce herself to him in the light of a heroine—secure his admiration—win his confidence—and thus establish herself firmly in his favour before she allowed him to discover who she really was. The char-woman who waits upon the prisoners in that gallery, was secretly ordered by me to further the designs of Miss Julia to the utmost of her power. To be brief, a variety of implements were supplied the young lady, to enable her to excavate an aperture in the wall, so that she might obtain entrance into Jocelyn's apartment. She would thus appear before him as his good genius—the heroine of an adventure promising escape for himself as well as for her——"

"Ah! then she would be revealing herself too abruptly," exclaimed Martignac,—"and before she was well assured of obtaining a strong hold on his confidence."

"All this was well weighed, considered, and calculated before-hand," returned the Prefect: "and, as a heroine ought to be a somewhat mysterious character, in order to inspire a deep interest as well as other engrossing sentiments, Miss Julia purposed to conceal her countenance in the folds of a thick veil—to disguise her voice—and to assume the sweetly romantic name of *Laura Linden*. The plan was altogether well-digested. Conceive an heroic young lady breaking at midnight through the wall into a young gentleman's chamber—amusing this young gentleman with some romantic tale to account for her captivity and anxiety to escape—seeking every little opportunity to play upon his senses and bewilder him with a strange mystification—then holding out to him the promise of immediate flight from dreary prisonage,—conceive all this, I say, and then you will admit that it must indeed be a heart of stone on which such seductive influences could fail

to make an impression. And now, Jules," continued the Prefect,—"and now what will you think when I tell you that *this* is the very night on which Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus are thus to meet. Yes—this very night is the curtain to rise upon the first act of the well-conceived drama: and indeed," added the Prefect, as he consulted his watch, "it is probable that they have already met—for 'tis near one in the morning!"

"But they are not really to escape together?" said Jules Martignac, inquiringly.

"Do you think me mad?" exclaimed the Prefect. "No, no—Jocelyn will remain here as long as his virtue continues stubborn: but if he yield to the temptations of the syren Julia, then may he go about his business—and welcome!"

"And how is the pretended endeavour to escape to be contravened?" asked Jules Martignac, delighted with the whole narrative.

"Not a link in the chain of the proceedings is deficient," responded the Prefect: "everything is duly weighed, considered, and pre-arranged. For instance, the watchman, as he goes his rounds, will suddenly command the lights to be extinguished in Jocelyn's chamber. The order will be given authoritatively and accompanied with menaces: and therefore the light *must be put out*. Now, what is the result! The young gentleman and the young lady are left together in the dark—and heaven only knows with what wiles, seductions, and blandishments the false Laura Linden will assail her very virtuous companion! At all events, this young man must be something more or less than human, if he resist the combined influences of such circumstances, temptations, and opportunities!"

"I think so too," observed the Under-Secretary of State, in a laconic tone, but with a salacious smacking of the lips. "And therefore, you say that if he does really succumb either this night, or on some early occasion——"

"Oh! once let him sink vanquished and overcome into the arms of Julia Owen," cried the Prefect, "and he can no longer hold up his head as the champion of virtue! Ashamed, disgraced, and degraded in his own estimation,—pulled down from the pedestal of his austere rectitude and immaculate chivalry,—he will either be glad to conceal his diminished head in some solitary nook,—or else, in an access of despair, will plunge deeper into the fount of bliss! And this latter theory is the more probable: for if the wiles, artifices, and seductions of the syren Julia once triumph, he will henceforth yield to the current of so irresistible an infatuation and devote all his thoughts to the beautiful mistress whom he will thus have gained—neither thinking of interference with the designs of the Prince Regent on the one hand, nor remaining bent upon contracting an unequal marriage with Louisa Stanley, on the other!"

"Ah! then there is an objection to this marriage, is there?" exclaimed Jules Martignac.

"Yes—I believe so," responded the Prefect. "But that appears to be altogether a minor consideration in comparison with the one grand aim of disarming him as to his interference with the mission of the Owens."

While the Prefect was yet giving utterance to the latter portion of this sentence, a valet entered the room: and the moment his master had ceased speaking, the servant advanced and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Good," said the Prefect: then waiting an instant until the valet had withdrawn, he observed, "Well, my friends, it is as I had anticipated: for the watchman has just sent in word that he saw Mr. Loftus examining the window, and that upon raising his voice to command the lights to be put out, he beheld the shadow of a female form reflected upon the opposite wall, as it flitted across the young Englishman's chamber."

"Oh! happy fellow," cried the Under-Secretary of State, "if he will but avail himself of the happiness within his reach!"

The door now again opened: but this time it was to usher in the Marquis of Leveson, who made his appearance in full evening costume, he having just quitted the mansion of the British Ambassador. As soon as the wonted greetings were exchanged between himself and the Prefect, and when also the nobleman had been duly presented to the assembled guests, he glanced significantly at the great police authority as if to inquire what news he had to impart relative to the affair that so particularly interested himself.

"We are all friends here, my lord," said the Prefect; "and being all as it were officially connected, there are no secrets between us. My two Secretaries are of course acquainted with all that transpires at the Prefecture: these three gentlemen," he continued, glancing towards the spies, "hold secret offices of great trust in connexion with the establishment: and that gentleman," added the Prefect, looking towards Jules Martignac, "as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, enjoys of course a complete insight into every thing that regards the police. But although, my lord, so many persons are thus acquainted with your special business in Paris and with all that regards the mission of the young English ladies in whom you are interested,—yet the secret itself is as safe as if it were locked up only in your own breast: for the Police Establishment of this great capital sees but with the same eye, hears with but one ear, speaks with but one tongue, and thinks with but one brain. Although consisting of many persons, therefore, it is one great and indivisible whole, and impossible of proving faithless to itself."

"I thank your Excellency for these explanations and assurances," replied Lord Leveson; "and I entertain not the least apprehension for the safety of my secret. Since, then, we are all acquainted with its nature," he continued, glancing with an urbane smile round the board, "we may discourse without reserve thereon."

"Most assuredly," replied the Prefect. "And now, my lord, I have the pleasure to announce to you, from information which I received a few moments before your lordship's arrival, that the grand scheme has reached its crisis—the point at which it will either succeed speedily, or fail signally!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the Marquis, his countenance lighting up with joy: "do you mean really to tell me that Julia Owen is at this moment with your prisoner? This is excellent, especially as I have brought some one with me ——"

"Did I not assure your lordship this morning," interrupted the Prefect, not heeding the last words of the nobleman, "that it would be for to-night?"

"Yes," responded Leveson: "and relying upon the accuracy of your Excellency's information, I have brought a certain person with me whom I wish to become a spectatress of her beloved Jocelyn in the arms of the seductive Julia."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Prefect: "is it possible that you have caused Miss Louisa Stanley to come all the way from England to view her lover's infidelity?—supposing that such infidelity shall really take place."

"And wherefore not kill two birds with one stone?" said the Marquis, with a knowing look. "The opportunity was too good to be lost—and I accordingly availed myself of it."

"'Tis an admirable stroke of policy!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "Yes—an admirable stroke of policy if your lordship be indeed anxious to break off the contemplated match between Louisa Stanley and this Jocelyn. And, by the bye, since I have heard that this Louisa is so beautiful," continued the vain young Frenchman, with a self-sufficient air, "perhaps your lordship would afford me an opportunity of making myself agreeable to her: for I should really like to have an English mistress."

"I am sorry that I cannot gratify you in this respect," returned the Marquis of Leveson, smiling: "but the fact is that Louisa Stanley is such a perfect angel of beauty I intend to try my own fortune with her first."

"But where is she?" inquired the Prefect.

"On leaving the ambassador's just now," responded the Marquis, "I drove round to the hotel where she is staying with me, and brought her hither in my carriage. She is now in the anteroom——"

"And Mary Owen, who was staying with her at Canterbury?" said the Prefect.

"Is still remaining there," answered Leveson, "in order to take care of Louisa's sick aunt during her absence. Mary is harmless enough while thus employed, and while thus buried in that seclusion. But let us now take a peep into Jocelyn's chamber," added the Marquis, turning his eyes upon the Prefect as he rose from his seat.

"I am at your service, my lord," said that functionary. "Gentlemen, you must excuse us for a few minutes—we cannot take so large a party with us, especially as it appears there is a young lady to accompany us."

The Marquis of Leveson and the Prefect, now quitting the saloon together, passed into the anteroom where Louisa Stanley was waiting. Her form was enveloped in an ample cloak; and a large bonnet, of the Swiss shepherdess-hat style then in vogue, shaded her features. But at the first glance which the Prefect threw upon her, he was indeed struck by the extraordinary beauty of her countenance—although the pallor of grief and the restless expression of acute suspense were upon every feature. Nor less was he enabled to remark that the very drapery which concealed her figure, also developed its matchless symmetry: and beautiful as the Prefect had fancied Julia Owen to be when he saw her on the day she was introduced to the Prefecture, he was now instantaneously struck with the fact that *her* charms were thrown completely into the shade when compared with the transcendent loveliness of Louisa Stanley. The thought therefore traversed the Prefect's brain, that it would really after all be but a little matter of wonder, if the mere image of the pure-minded, innocent, and angelic Louisa should preserve Jocelyn's fidelity immaculate and intact against all the seductive wiles and wanton fascinations of Julia Owen.

"This gentlemen, Miss Stanley," said the Marquis of Leveson, introducing the French official to the young lady, "is his Excellency the Prefect of Police: and he will now explain to you—painful though the subject must be—that the individual whom you have known and unfortunately learnt to love as Jocelyn Loftus, has been incarcerated in the Prefecture on account of his grievous immoralities and wild excesses."

"Oh! heavens, if this be indeed true!" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands and bursting into tears: but almost instantly wiping away those crystal drops of bitter, bitter anguish—and with a sudden resumption of an air of maiden dignity—she said, in a tone of forced calmness, "But I am nerved to hear the worst, after all the terrible things that your lordship, with so much disinterested and indeed paternal kindness, has told me!"

While giving utterance to this latter portion of her sentence, with a frank and artless confidence in what she believed to be the good feeling of the Marquis of Leveson, the maiden fixed her blue eyes mournfully upon him: and then she turned those plaintive regards upon the Prefect, with a look that seemed to implore him to state all he knew at once and with as much brevity as possible.

"Young lady," said the Prefect, now also thinking it right to play the paternal, and therefore assuming an air and a tone which seemed to imply that he was performing a very painful task and accomplishing a most disagreeable duty,—"young lady," he repeated, "it is better that you should hear at once the real character of him who has gained your affections, than that you should make so important a discovery when it has become too late to retreat from an unfortunate marriage. The plain truth is, that you have been wooed and your heart has been won by a mere adventurer living under a feigned name, and pursuing a career of reckless extravagance, deep dissipation, and inveterate profligacy."

"O God! have mercy upon me," murmured the unhappy Louisa: and then she compressed her lips forcibly to keep back the scream that rose up from her anguished heart to the very tip of her tongue. "But pray go on, sir—go on," she cried, with nervous trepidation, as she once more wrestled successfully against the harrowing poignancy of her feelings,—or rather fortified herself with the unnatural composure of despair.

"It is too true, then, Miss Stanley," said the Prefect, encouraged by the significant signs and nods which the Marquis gave him, unperceived by the unfortunate girl whom the two wretches were thus basely torturing,—"it is too true that Jocelyn Loftus has conducted himself in such a manner since his arrival in Paris as to scandalize society: and the strong arm of the law has been compelled to interfere to punish him for his excesses. Not that he has committed any positive crime; but his debaucheries, his seductions, and his moral offences have brought dishonour on the name of English-

[JULIA AND MARY OWEN.]

men. Therefore, availing myself of the fact that he was sojourning in France under a false name,—a circumstance rendering him amenable to the law,—I have been compelled in my capacity as guardian of the public morals, to incarcerate him within these walls."

"I dare not disbelieve you, sir—I cannot doubt your word," said Louisa, gazing vacantly around, as if her senses were abandoning her: "but yet it appears to me so impossible—indeed, it looks so like a monstrous dream——"

"Alas! my dear young lady," said Lord Leveson, as he took her hand, with much apparent kindness, "you perceive that it is but too true! Besides which, so high a functionary and so honourable a man as the Prefect of Police would not possibly be guilty of an injustice, on the one hand, towards the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus—nor, on the other hand, would he so uselessly deceive, or so wantonly afflict a young damsel like you."

"Assuredly not," exclaimed the Prefect. "But I forgive these doubts—this uncertainty—this incredulity, which Miss Stanley displays. They are the evidences of that generous confidence and sublime trust which the loving heart naturally reposes in the object of its affections. But as it is my painful duty to put an end to all your doubts, come hither, young lady—come hither!"

Thus speaking, the Prefect opened a side-door, and led the way into a little cabinet, or office, where a lamp was burning on a table. And upon this same table lay an enormous book with a black cover. It was thicker and larger than the thickest and largest Bible ever used in a Protestant Church: and upon the back of the binding, which was at least a foot wide, were stamped in dingy gold letters these words—*Le Livre Noir;* which, being translated into English, mean, "The Black Book."

Opening this huge volume, and hastily turning over the leaves, which were full of manuscript en-

tries in as many different styles of writing as it is possible to conceive, the Prefect paused at a particular page—ran his finger down a certain column,—stopped at a special entry—and said, "Behold, Miss Stanley, the record of the arrest!"

Louisa threw her shuddering looks upon the ominous page, and hastily scanned the particular lines which were pointed out to her. Those lines comprised an entry which if translated into English, would read as follows:—"An Englishman; aged about three-and-twenty; arrested for having his passport made out in the false name of *Jocelyn Loftus*: his real name is known to the Prefect, but for special reasons is not mentioned here. See, however, *Prefect's Private Minute Book*, Folio 2011, second column, 15th line from the top."

"I wish to see no more," murmured the unhappy Louisa, in a dying tone. "I have already seen too much."

"And yet, young lady," said the Marquis,—"for your own complete satisfaction you will consent to behold the crowning proof of your false lover's wickedness and depravity—that crowning proof which I have brought you hither at this late hour to witness! By your Excellency's permission," continued the Marquis, turning towards the Prefect, "we will now repair——"

"I understand," interrupted the Prefect. "Come with me."

Thus speaking, he led the way from the little cabinet, the door of which he carefully locked behind him: then, passing out of the ante-room, he took a lamp in his hand and conducted the Marquis and Louisa up a staircase, at the summit of which there was a massive door. Having noiselessly and cautiously opened this door by means of a key which he had with him, he led the way down a long gloomy passage containing a row of doors, at the *last but one* of which he stopped short.

"Now follow me with the utmost caution and on tiptoe," he said, speaking in a low whisper to the Marquis and Louisa: then, having opened the door with an evident desire to avoid the chance of even a hinge creaking, he deposited the lamp in a niche in the passage, and stole into the chamber.

Louisa Stanley now hung back, and staggered against the wall, as if a faintness was coming over her: for shocked, afflicted, and also indignant as she was at the thought of her lover's profligacy and perfidy, her pure soul nevertheless revolted from the idea of becoming a witness of any proof of his guilt.

"Go on, young lady—go on," whispered the Marquis of Leveson, in a hurried tone: "you must see out this matter to the end, and sustain your courage until the very last!"

Startled into a feverish excitement rather than inspired with any real feeling of curiosity, Louisa Stanley passed into the chamber,—whither however the Marquis did not follow her. But he remained upon the threshold, as if contented to hear the report which might presently be made to him, instead of witnessing with his own eyes the scene itself.

Noiselessly and rapidly did Louisa glide into that chamber: but scarcely had she advanced half a dozen paces, when through the gloom which prevailed she beheld a light shining dimly in as it were from the depths of some recess. At this moment the Prefect took her by the hand, and hurried her forward in the direction where that light seemed to be burning. A few paces more—and Louisa now saw that this light was really in an adjacent chamber, whence it emanated through an aperture in the partition-wall.

Close up to this opening did the Prefect hurry the affrighted maiden—for affrighted she really was at an appearance of so sinister a nature, inasmuch as it really seemed at the moment as if through the vista of gloom her eyes were resting upon a light coming from a vaulted sepulchre. But at the same instant that this thought traversed her imagination, a well-known voice struck upon her ear,—aye, struck upon her brain—vibrating down every chord that led even unto her heart's core: and this voice said in a tone of impassioned remonstrance, "Oh! you will drive me mad—you will drive me mad!"

A shriek rose to the very margin of Louisa's lips—even as a fountain, when disturbed at its depths, bubbles up to the very brim. But the sound was instantaneously stifled and subdued before it burst forth: for an overwhelming sense of utter misery fell crushingly upon the maiden like an awful consternation, as she heard the melodious tones of a female voice replying with the fervour of passion, "O Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn—thou knowest that I love thee!"

Louisa heard no more. The consternation which stifled her scream, struck another blow and deprived her of consciousness—so that she reeled half round and fell heavily upon the floor.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Jocelyn from the inner apartment; "what sound was that?"—and seizing the light from the table, he sprang towards the aperture.

Thrusting the lamp to the entire length of his arm through the opening, its rays fell full upon the countenance of the damsel whom the Prefect was now hurriedly raising from the floor. But, oh! what words can depict the hurricane of amazement and the tornado of agonizing thoughts and wildering ideas which swept all in a moment, like a flight of barbed arrows, through Jocelyn's brain, when the glare of that lamp fell upon the pale, inanimate, but ever lovely countenance of his own Louisa?

A cry of rage—a yell of madness burst furiously from him: but, quick as thought, the Prefect bore the senseless maiden from the room, the door of which was immediately closed. In the frenzied excitement to which he was now a prey, Jocelyn dropped the lamp from his hand; and it was instantaneously extinguished as it fell upon the floor of the adjacent chamber, into which he had thrust it through the aperture.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed Julia Owen, startled and affrighted by the suddenness of the scene which thus terminated all in a moment in utter darkness.

"Oh! wretch—profligate—demoness that thou art!" cried Jocelyn, in a voice indicative of a rending anguish: "thou hast ruined me in the eyes of my beloved!"

And as the last word thrilled from his lips with all the wildness of delirium, he fell heavily upon the floor.

"Jocelyn, Jocelyn—speak to me—speak to me!" shrieked Julia Owen, a mortal terror now seizing upon her—for this scene was dreadful in the depth

of that pitchy darkness. "Good heavens! he does not answer me!"—then groping her way to the spot where he had fallen in the alcove whence the bed, it will be remembered, was drawn out, she stooped down and placed her hand upon his face.

His features were motionless, though bathed in those cold damps that send a chill through the warm living flesh that comes in contact with them: and her terror now increasing almost to an agony, she placed her ear to his lips. But she could catch the sound of neither breathing or gasping; and while her brain reeled and she felt as if she were going mad, she placed her hand upon his heart. It throbbed not—no pulsation could she feel,—and with a loud cry that rang forth thrillingly and wild upon the night air, she said, "He is dead—he is dead! My God! 'tis I whose wickedness has killed him. O God! O God!"—and then all consciousness abandoned her.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE HANGMAN IN HIS GLORY AGAIN.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning; and Mr. Daniel Coffin, having disposed of the beards of all his customers, proceeded to scrape off his own. Seldom was the ludicrous more singularly blended with the ferocious, than in the expression of that man's countenance, as he stood before the glass making those grimaces which usually accompany the progress of the razor over the parts whence the capillary stubble is to be removed. Having shaved himself as closely and neatly as he could, the Hangman ascended to his bed-chamber, where he proceeded to dress himself in his Sunday's apparel: and his toilette being completed, he went down again to his parlour, where he ordered Sally Melmoth to give him a dram of brandy "to keep the cold out of his stomach."

"And where are you off to so smart this morning?" she inquired, as she handed him the liquor.

"Aye—where indeed?" asked her brother Dick.

"Well, you'll be surprised perhaps when I tell you," returned Coffin: then looking hastily round, and observing that Jack the Foundling was not in the room at the moment, he said in a low voice, "I am going to call on our friend Mr. Larry Sampson."

"Larry Sampson!" ejaculated the brother and sister, with looks of amazement. "What on earth can you want with *him*?"

"Well, I suppose you are not afraid of my going to his place," observed the Hangman, with a grim smile of mingled cunning and ferocious satisfaction: "it's no longer the lion's den into which a fellow situated as I was, didn't dare poke his head; and though Larry himself was for a short time a lion in my path, yet he has lost his claws and his teeth now so far as I am concerned. He can't bite or yet scratch: the royal pardon," added Coffin, tapping his pocket significantly, "has made me proof against all dangers in that quarter."

"Of course—we know that," observed Sally Melmoth. "But why go near such a person at all? The very look of him must be odious after all you suffered on his account—playing at hide and seek as you was, and all the latter part of the time not daring to go to your old haunts either at the Folly Bridges, or Polly Scratchem's, or any of the flash cribs, because we got the information that they were all being watched by Larry's men——"

"Well, well—what's the use of recapitulating all these things that we know so thoroughly?" cried the Hangman. "The fact is, Larry got scent some how or another of my being alive and kicking: and, by jingo! now that the thought strikes me," ejaculated the man, his countenance suddenly assuming a look terribly ferocious,—"I do really believe that I can guess who it was that gave Larry a hint of my having escaped the Thames and being still in the land of the living."

"Ah! who do you think?" exclaimed Dick Melmoth.

"Not the Foundling—eh?" said Sally.

"Not at all," answered Coffin. "I know poor Jack is staunch. But who was the first person that I went to after leaving Beechey Manor——"

"Taggarty, to be sure!" cried both brother and sister as it were in the same breath.

"Aye—that's it," said Coffin, with a look gloomily ominous. "Don't you recollect the fellow wouldn't either have me in his house to live a short while—nor would he lend a hand in putting Larry quietly and comfortably out of the way when there was such a capital opportunity. Besides, the very fact that Larry was there that night——"

"Yes—but that was about Jack the Foundling," observed Dick Melmoth.

"Ah! but when once a fellow gets any way in league or connexion with a Bow Street runner," exclaimed the Hangman, dogmatically, "you never can tell what he may be enticed into. At all events, it's very certain," he continued, "that from the moment I went and showed myself at Taggarty's, all the flash cribs and boozing-kens were closely watched by Larry's spies."

"To be sure! The information was deuced soon passed round to all the knowing ones," observed Dick Melmoth: "and so we lost no time in putting you up to what was going on. Why, there was Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill—Sharp Mawley's over in the Mint—Meg Blowen's in the Almonry—Polly Scratchem's down in Whitechapel—and Benculi's crib in Jacob's Island,—they were all close watched day and night, without ceasing——"

"And devilish lucky it was, then, that I hadn't gone to either," said Daniel Coffin, "as was my original intention. But by going and staying first with Old Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel—then with the Swag Chovey Bloak in St. George's Fields—I managed to escape all Mr. Sampson's devices till the very day that Dysart was to be hung and I was wanted again at the Old Bailey. Come,—give me another glass of lush," he exclaimed with a chuckle that sounded like the subdued growl of a hyæna: "for after all, I like talking of these things when they are all past and gone and the danger's over."

"And so you really do suspect Taggarty?" said Sally Melmoth, as she refilled the Hangman's glass.

"Well, I don't see how the devil I can help suspecting him," returned Coffin. "The idea flashed to my mind all in a moment: but it once took a deep root there—and now let me

you that if I was to think over it a hundred years, I couldn't be more convinced than I am at this instant that it *was* Taggarty who must have peached."

"But what are you going to Larry Sampson's for this morning?" asked his mistress.

"Why, there's five or six fellows to be tucked up down in the country," answered the Hangman, with a sinister leer; "and I was going to ask Larry just to drop a note to the sheriffs of those counties and recommend me as a gentleman which does his business in a neat, agreeable, and workmanlike manner in the hanging line:"—and he gave another low chuckling laugh the mirth of which was as pleasant as that of a hyæna.

"But you don't want such country custom, do you?" asked Sally, in surprise.

"No such thing," returned Coffin: "but what I *do* want is an excuse to have a chat with Larry Sampson. I dare say he'll let bygones be bygones and talk pleasant enough when he sees that I am civil on my side. Larry isn't a fellow to bear grudges: but I am though—desperately—infernally!" he added with terrible emphasis.

"And what do you want to talk to him about?" asked Sally, now questioning the Hangman with more timidity than at first—for his temper appeared to be lowering. "But perhaps you hope to be able to worm out some secrets from Larry Sampson?"

"A little in that way," responded the Hangman, with a grim smile, which reassured his mistress and her brother as to the condescending and communicative humour he was in. "What I chiefly want to see is whether Larry will speak to me about Jack the Foundling at all. For don't you see that it was so odd he should get all that information from Taggarty—drop so many hints about the lad's probably being the son of well-to-do-parents—and then suddenly take no more notice of the matter than if he had never made any such inquiries at all? So I mean to try and draw Master Larry out in that respect."

"And how shall you do it?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Don't you see, I've got my excuse all ready cut and dried for Larry," continued the Hangman: "and I shall tell him that the reason I want to get these country execution jobs is to have an opportunity of letting the Foundling try his hand at tucking the chaps up—as I shall say that I mean to make a Jack Ketch of him. So now don't you see that if there is any truth at all in the idea of the Foundling belonging to a respectable family, Larry will deuced soon be horrified at the idea of the young fellow taking to the gallows-functions: and he'll tell me to wait a while or think better of it, or something of that sort—and if he does this, then we shall really know that he didn't make all those inquiries about the lad Jack for nothing at all."

"Well really, Daniel," said his mistress, coaxingly, "I always knew you was a wide-awake fellow—but I didn't give you credit for so much cunning as all this."

"Nor I," observed Dick Melmoth: "and I do believe you'll succeed in getting something out of Larry after all."

"And if you do find that Jack is the son of respectable parents," observed Sal, "you'll be able to make a pretty penny of the business—eh?"

"Well, we shall see:"—and the Hangman was about to sally forth, when suddenly recollecting something, he felt the pockets of his coat, and then exclaimed, "By Satan! I was going without my tools—and that's a thing I don't often do, seeing that they very frequently come into use at a moment when it's least expected that they'll be wanted at all."

Dick Melmoth hastened to open a cupboard, whence he took forth a bunch of skeleton keys, which he wrapped up in paper so as to prevent them from jingling. He next produced from the same place a small "jemmy," or crowbar, about a foot and a half long, and about the thickness of the thumb—but of the strongest wrought iron, and admirably shaped for burglarious purposes. He then drew forth a small tin box an inch and a half in diameter, and filled with wax, which was used to take the impression of a key should such process be required for ulterior purposes. Lastly, Dick Melmoth produced a couple of knitting-needles, pointed in a particular manner, and used for cutting panes of glass in the same way as a glazier's diamond.

All the articles just detailed did Mr. Daniel Coffin secure about his person; and as he wore a sort of shooting-coat, the crowbar lay easily enough lengthwise at the bottom of one of his capacious pockets. But it must not be supposed that the Hangman had any special purpose now in view in thus arming himself with the implements of his secret profession. The fact was that he seldom if ever stirred abroad without those little articles which might at any moment come unexpectedly handy: and as habit is second nature, he positively would not have felt comfortable had he omitted his usual practice in this respect.

Sallying forth accordingly, with the royal pardon in one of his pockets and the implements of burglary distributed about in all the others, Mr. Daniel Coffin took his way to Long Acre. On knocking at the door of Larry Sampson's house, his summons was answered by Dame Margery, the officer's housekeeper, to whom the person of the Hangman was not known. Not that she was however at all prepossessed in his favour: for, as the reader is already aware, he had a most hang-dog look about him, even when attired in his best apparel.

"Is Mr. Sampson at home?" he asked.

"No, he is not," responded Dame Margery, eyeing him askance, and keeping the door half closed.

"But I want to see him very particularly," said the Hangman. "Indeed, it's about professional business," he added, with a significant look.

"Then who are you?" inquired the woman.

"Lord bless you!" returned the Hangman: "my functions are up there in the Old Bailey:"—and as he spoke, with a still deeper significancy of look, he jerked his thumb over his left shoulder in the direction of the locality which he had named.

Now it instantaneously struck Dame Margery that the fellow must be a turnkey from Newgate; and, with this belief, she had no longer any hesitation in admitting him into the house. She accordingly requested him to walk in and wait a short time,—observing that it was more than probable that Mr. Sampson would not be long before he returned. Daniel Coffin at once accepted the invitation, and was forthwith conducted into the breakfast-parlour, where Dame Margery left him. But after waiting upwards of three quarters of an hour, the Hangman got tired of re-

maining there doing nothing; and he thought that he might as well repair to the nearest public-house and regale himself until Mr. Sampson should return. He accordingly issued forth from the parlour with the view of telling the housekeeper whither he was going, and requesting that a message might be sent to inform him when her master came back: but though he coughed, hemm'd, and stamped with his foot, in order to attract the attention of Dame Margery, no response was given to his summons. Fancying she might be up-stairs, he coolly and quietly ascended to the storey above; for Mr. Daniel Coffin was not accustomed to be over nice or delicate in the observance of ceremony and the punctilios of etiquette.

"Hem! hah!—I say, now then!—will nobody answer?" he exclaimed, on reaching the landing of the first floor: but all was silent—for the very simple reason that Dame Margery was down in the kitchen attending to her culinary duties, and being rather deaf, she heard not the Hangman's voice.

As for the servant-of-all-work, she had gone out upon an errand: and thus did it happen that no attention was paid to Mr. Coffin.

"Well, I suppose the place is deserted," he muttered to himself, in that low growling tone which was peculiar to him when vexed or annoyed: and opening the door that was nearest, he looked in and perceived that it was a handsomely furnished drawing-room. "Upon my word! Mr. Sampson is quite a gentleman. Ah! he must have made a good thing of his business—no doubt of it!" added the Hangman, as he glanced around the well-appointed apartment: then stepping forth upon the landing again, he closed the door behind him. "I wonder what *this* room is," he now said, as he grasped the handle of another door; but it was locked.

Obedient to some strange and scarcely accountable impulse, Daniel Coffin stooped down to peep through the keyhole: but he found it impervious to his view, being closed on the inner side;—and he muttered to himself, "Well, this is a peculiar lock, made on purpose to prevent anybody from looking through it."

Such a circumstance was quite enough to arouse the curiosity of the Hangman; and without any more ado he at once took forth his skeleton keys, and thrust one of them into the lock, in which it turned without difficulty. The door was opened accordingly; and Coffin entered the apartment.

And now it would be difficult to describe this individual's amazement at the first glance which he cast around the room: for the walls were studded with innumerable pegs, to which hung an infinite assortment of male and female dresses. These were evidently intended and used as disguises;—and as the Hangman contemplated this singular wardrobe with a closer scrutiny, he observed that it contained the specimen of almost every costume then existing in England. There was even the Court dress, as well as the soldier's uniform: the fashionable suit of a West End dandy was side-by-side with the lace-bedizened livery of a domestic servant. The complete costume of a sportsman was suspended next to the ragged garb of a beggar: the dress of a stone-mason was in contrast with that of a sweep. The characterestic apparel of a parish beadle hung next to the mud-besmeared garb of a peasant;—and the rough dress of a sailor was close to the modest uniform of a postman. In fine, the dresses of all grades and classes, as well as of both sexes, were comprised in this perfect museum of costume:—and it was quite clear that the individual possessing such an extraordinary collection, could at any moment transform himself into the semblance of a peer or a peasant—a parson or a postman—a sportsman or a soldier— a tailor or a tinker—a gentleman or a gipsy—a mariner or a pickpocket—a rollicking highwayman or a mean petty thief—a substantial farmer or a needy mendicant—a costermonger or a ballad singer—a fortune-teller or a match-woman—a fish-fag or a gipsy,—or in fine, any member of any grade, class, or section of society.

But these transformations were not to be made only by means of the various dresses suspended around: other auxiliaries and accessories were likewise at hand in this apartment. Thus, upon a long shelf stood a row of barber's blocks, each surmounted with a wig: and as a matter of course these wigs were of different colours, shapes, and qualities, affording specimens of all the varieties of the peruke species. Then, on another shelf there were false whiskers, mustachios, and beards,—yes, and even false eyebrows: and on a third shelf were pots of rouge, hair-powder, paints, colours, and dyes of all shades, degrees, and descriptions.

There was one more feature of interest in this room which came in for a due share of the Hangman's attention: and this was an enormous book, as large as a church-bible, and the contents of which were divided into three specific departments. The first was a list of all the bad characters, male and female, infesting the metropolis: and against every name was affixed the date of its entry in that book, thereby showing how long each individual in the category had been under the surveillance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson. The second compartment contained a list of all the flash cribs, boozing-kens, fence-shops, low lodging houses, and places of vile resort in which the metropolis abounded; and so complete was the information given by this list, that to every den thus specified was added the name of the person keeping it, followed by memoranda of what sort of characters frequented it, the sums paid for accommodation or refreshment, and all other particulars calculated to be of service to a Bow Street officer. The third compartment of this extraordinary book consisted of a journal, or diary, in which Mr. Lawrence Sampson was wont to enter minutes of his proceedings, remarkable incidents, gleanings and experiences, personal adventures, or any other matters worth recording in connexion with his avocations.

The reader will naturally suppose that on discovering this book of mysteries, the curiosity of the Hangman was instantaneously excited to ascertain first of all whether his own name figured in the category of bad characters: and on turning to the proper page and column, according to the alphabetical arrangement of the entries, he not only found the name of DANIEL COFFIN duly chronicled, but also the startling fact, as proved by the date annexed, that Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been aware of his real character for some years past.

As a matter of course all the low cribs and

boozing-kens, as well as all other vile haunts and infamous receptacles throughout the metropolis were chronicled in the second compartment. But as the reader may perhaps be curious to learn the manner in which Mr. Sampson kept his ledger of demoralization, debauchery, poverty, mendicity, and crime, we will quote a few miscellaneous extracts from this division of the great book:—

"*Rose and Crown*, Church Lane, St. Giles's. Weekly club held here; chiefly of street hawkers, costermongers, labourers, chimney-sweepers, and beggars: the women frequenting this place are nearly all Irish. A young fighting fellow in a flannel jacket (name forgotten) generally presides; always has a plate before him containing the subscription money to pay for the gin, beer, and tobacco. Sometimes the company amuse themselves by dancing reels; or else a fellow named Garry, formerly in the 18th Hussars, gives an exhibition of the shillelah dance. The landlord's name is——.

"*Sidney Smith*, Dock Street, Whitechapel. Evening concerts; dreadful low class of women, always on the look out for sailors flush of cash. Dancing as well as music: each person who dances pays twopence for the benefit of the musician.

"*The Black Bull*, Windmill Street, Haymarket. Music and dancing at this place; singing to a piano accompaniment. Most of the men frequenting this house are cross-coves, thimble-men, or swell-mobsmen: the females are women of the town. A great many juveniles visit this house, young thieves with their girls. The waiter is a comic fellow, sings comic songs, is on good terms with every body, and sips of every body's brandy-and-water with the most condescending friendship: always calling out for '*ladies and gentlemen to give their orders.*' The songs sung at this place are not indecent; mostly humourous. One of the most favourite flash songs begins in this way:—

A cross-cove is in the street for me,
And I a poor girl of a low degree;
If I was as rich as I am poor,
Ye never should go on the cross no more.

CHORUS.

He's a right down chap, a chickle leary chap, and a loving cove!

"*Penny Theatre*, Shorts' Gardens. Frequented by boys, girls, and all kinds of juvenile thieves and prostitutes: always dreadful bad language before the curtain draws up. The last night I was there, saw a drunken combat as an interlude between *George Barnwell* and a scene from the *Beggar's Opera*. Performers about ten in number; most of them go about attending fairs and shows in the season.

"*Red House* in the Mint: two people sleep in each bed, threepence a night. The grossest scenes of immorality constantly occurring in this place.

"*The Mogul*, Drury Lane. Large room holding several hundred persons: concerts and performances every night: frequented by all kinds of people; great numbers of dissolute livery servants meet here; also young apprentices and their girls. The landlord keeps it as respectable as he possibly can.

"*Thompson's Lodging Houses*, Castle Street, Long Acre. Nos. 23, 24, 25. Make up between 60 and 70 beds between them. Thompson has similar houses over in Mint Street; most detestable places, frequented by the worst of characters—every feeling of decency totally lost sight of, persons of both sexes and all ages sleeping promiscuously: grown up brothers and sisters thus sleep together.

"*Southgate's Lodging Houses* are in Mitre Court, St. John's Street; New Court, Cow Cross, Smithfield; Turnmill Street, Clerkenwell; and on Saffron Hill; altogether making up 300 beds every night.

"*Grout's Lodging Houses* in St. Giles's are filled with low truckle beds, supplied with a straw mattress, two coarse sheets, and an old rug. Here the poor but honest labouring man is in nightly company with the professional thief; while perhaps his wife and grown up daughters are compelled to herd with the vilest prostitutes. As a matter of course the people frequenting these lodging-houses consist of various descriptions; and each description may again be subdivided into various classes. It is a most truthful remark which I have heard, that '*the microscope shows the subdivision of atoms, and a minute inquiry into various classes subdivides society into unimagined grades.*'

"No. —, Wentworth Street, Whitechapel, is a kinchin-ken. The fellow who keeps it is called the *kidsman*: he boards and lodges young boys, training them up to be thieves; always has at least twenty boys in his establishment: the young ones are instructed by the elder, and are never allowed to go out before they are quite perfect."*

These and numerous other entries, especially those regarding the Hangman's favourite haunts, met his view; nor did he fail to observe that Taggarty's shop on Mutton Hill was mentioned in the category as a place where cheeses, flitches of bacon, bladders of lard, and all kinds of chandlery were purchased "without any questions being asked." But no words can describe the amazement, the consternation, and even the stupefaction which seized upon Daniel Coffin, when on searching for the entry relative to Bencull's *Dark Crib* in Jacob's Island, he found the following memorandum appended:—"*See my journal, Wednesday, Sept.* 19, 1814, *for the account of how I visited this place disguised as a knife-grinder, and how I was thrown into the black ditch, escaping with my life in a manner truly miraculous.*"

Yes—stupified indeed was the Hangman as these words met his view. All his thoughts were suddenly congealed—all his ideas were frozen in a moment! But when he somewhat recovered himself, and his reflections once more flowed on in their proper channel, mystery after mystery was cleared up relative to past incidents, and truth after truth revealed itself to his comprehension. Yes—for when he glanced around and beheld all those varied and admirably contrived disguises, he was no longer at a loss to understand how the whole plot relative to the burglary at Mrs. Owen's had been discovered by Larry Sampson: for that the knife-grinder and the officer were identical, was a fact now placed beyond all possibility of doubt: and what, then, was more probable but that the country bumpkin in the tap-room of the *King's Arms* at Richmond, was also the ubiquitous and protean Lawrence Sampson?

But while he was still pursuing his hurried and startling reflections in this manner, Daniel Coffin hastened to turn to the third compartment of the great book: and *there*, sure enough, he discovered a detailed account of all the officer's proceedings while engaged in prosecuting his inquiries and researches into the outrage offered to the Prince Regent and the Marquis of Leveson, as detailed in earlier chapters of our narrative. A farther investigation into Mr. Sampson's diary showed Daniel Coffin that Taggarty had *not* betrayed him to the officer, but that the seeming beggar-woman who had so importunately solicited alms of him as he issued from Taggarty's house on the night in question, was in reality Lawrence Sampson. Other facts did the Hangman also ascertain concerning matters that either interested himself or those persons with whom he was connected: but we shall not pause to enter into minuter details

* Some of this information is actually chronicled upon the authority of entries and memoranda in a police-book to which we have been allowed access.

now. Suffice it to say, that without for an instant recollecting the possibility—or indeed the probability of being interrupted while prying into the mysteries of the bulky volume, he continued to study its contents with the deepest attention; and the more profoundly he examined into it, the more was he astonished and bewildered at the extraordinary mass of information which Lawrence Sampson had acquired relative to all the bad characters and flash houses in London. Nor less was the Hangman astounded at the remarkable perseverance, the unflinching dauntlessness, the exquisite skill, and the reckless indifference to danger, which characterised the Bow Street officer, and which qualities were made apparent enough by the various adventures, enterprises, and proceedings chronicled in the diary.

We must, however, leave Daniel Coffin for a few minutes to peruse the entries chiefly regarding himself or his companions in iniquity, while we proceed to furnish our readers with a few specimens of those parts of Mr. Sampson's journal which may be termed his *comments* or *experiences*. And therefore, without farther preface, we quote the following extracts:—

"Parliament being over, most of the beggars are going out of town to make the round of the country-seats of the nobility and gentry. A great many of them are dressed like old soldiers or sailors; and they are all well provided with lists of those houses and estates where military or naval officers dwell. Be it observed that before the beggars go out into the country upon these expeditions, they meet at certain cadgers'-haunts, low lodging-houses, or boozing-kens in London, and exchange information as to what country-seats are *good* to call at. Because as the same parties cannot call twice at the same place *during the season*, they lose nothing by giving each other such information. In fact, it is a constant practice with beggars to compare notes in this manner. When once out in the country in Autumn, they remain out while the *hare-skin time* is on; because while buying and selling hare-skins, they are able to pass away a great quantity of bad money.

"Women hire infants for fourpence or sixpence a day each, and make at least five shillings a day by carrying them about—particularly if a woman hires two children at the same time and represents them as twins.

"There are some beggars who know every *good* house in the country. Some who *go the highfly*, or play the part of broken-down gentlemen, manage to make ten or fifteen pounds a week. Sometimes they take drawings with them, which they present to the ladies whom they see at parlour-windows, or walking in gardens, or on lawns, at country-seats, leaving the reward to their generosity. Sometimes they bribe gentlemen's servants to take in their begging letters, and just throw in any little word of commiseration that may assist their case. Just the opposite of these are the beggars that *go upon the shallow*—that is, half-naked. They obtain from compassionate persons quantities of left-off clothes, by which they make as much sometimes as twelve or fifteen shillings per day. This is one of the most lucrative systems of beggary; but it of course succeeds best in the cold weather, when the beggars manage to shiver and shake like aspens, and thus attract a vast amount of sympathy. The system of hawking is also excellent: many small shopkeepers do not make in a day so much as some of these itinerant venders. Take for instance a pair of knit cotton braces: the hawker buys them at fourpence, and sells them at one shilling and twopence—or at all events a shilling. He puts on the extra halfpence expecting to be beaten down.*

"Beggars not only provide themselves with lists of the residences of benevolent people in town and country, but also have lists of all charitable Societies and Institutions, to which they constantly apply in the winter; such as for coals, potatoes, &c., which they always sell as soon as obtained, for half their value. Women get baby-linen, tickets of admission to lying-in-hospitals, &c., all of which they immediately sell for what they can get.

"Of an evening in London, the beggars meet at their favourite haunts, where they eat and drink of the best. At night they generally stay in doors and get drunk; but a few of them dress themselves out in decent style and go to the cheap concerts or to low gaming-houses. In Petticoat Lane, Whitechapel, there are several low gaming-houses, kept by Jews; and as it is chiefly here that the beggars sell the clothes which they obtain when out *on the shallow*, so it is hither they come to lose their ill-got money again at the gaming-table. Nearly all the Jews in Petticoat Lane are receivers of stolen goods, or fences; one or two of them keep fence-shops up at the West-End as branch establishments, and even sometimes send large quantities of stolen property abroad. There are a great many publicans who buy stolen property, and then sell it again at a profit to the Jew-fences. Some of these Jews go into the country once or twice a year, travel from town to town, and sell to country-dealers the plunder of the metropolis. There are many Christian jewellers and silversmiths who buy property *direct* from thieves; and it is common enough with refiners, who never ask any questions at all. The wealthiest Jew-fences have agents, and are themselves but seldom seen in the transactions.

"Another dangerous class of persons who profit by the crimes which they do not *directly* commit themselves, are the *putters-up* of burglaries; and these are very often marine-store dealers, or else flashy-looking fellows frequenting public-houses. This latter class is specially dangerous: they get hold of servant girls who come to fetch the beer, pretend to court them, worm out of them the secrets of the houses to which they belong, and then give the requisite information to the cracksmen or burglars. Livery-servants are frequently *putters-up* of burglaries. The cracksman or burglar generally dresses shabby, like a distressed tradesman: they remain all day in low public-houses or boozing-kens, drinking or playing at skittles.

"At the bottom of Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell, is Capel Court; and there lives a blacksmith who makes housebreakers' implements. Cracksmen go to him and give their orders: he tells them when the implements will be ready, and appoints to meet them at some boozing-ken, perhaps quite in another part of London. The sum agreed upon is paid at this interview; and the blacksmith hands over a brown paper parcel, containing all the implements, stating that the packet has just come up from the country."*

Having thus afforded our readers a specimen of Mr. Larry Sampson's diary, we will now return to the Hangman, whom we left busily engaged in consulting those entries and statements which specially regarded himself and the members of the gang to which he belonged.

He was still deep in his somewhat unpleasant though interesting studies, when the thought suddenly floated to his mind that he was incurring a great risk of detection by prolonging his intrusion in the privacy of the officer's *sanctum*. He there-

* India-rubber braces cost 12s. a dozen; and the hawker sells them at 2s. a-piece. Steel pens can be bought as low as 4d. a gross—that is, twelve dozen; and the hawker can sell three or four pens for a penny.

* The preceding information is given upon the authority of the police-book referred to in the annotation at page 270; and relative to Petticoat Lane we were particularly struck by the following remarks:—"The Jews here can raise money to purchase any amount of property. There is one Jew, L—— L——, who has bought as much as 1200*l.* worth of stolen property at one time. If the royal crown and all the jewels were stolen from the Tower and taken down to Petticoat Lane, the money would be raised in less than a couple of hours to buy them all. The great merchants could not raise a foreign loan quicker upon 'Change."

fore resolved to beat a precipitate retreat: and closing the book, he stole forth from the room—shut the door behind him—re-locked it by means of the skeleton-key which had ere now opened it—and then crept stealthily down-stairs into the breakfast-parlour.

Fortunate indeed was it that he took this step just at the moment: for scarcely had he seated himself in the parlour, when Dame Margery made her appearance.

"Mr. Sampson," she said, "has this moment sent up from Bow Street, to inform me that he shall not be home to dinner, and indeed that I must not expect to see him before the evening, as some pressing business has transpired to demand his immediate attention elsewhere."

"Oh! very well, ma'am," said Daniel Coffin, inwardly rejoicing to think that he had not been surprised by the old dame up in her master's private room. "Then I needn't wait any longer—and so I'll call another day."

"Who shall I say has been?" inquired the housekeeper.

The Hangman hesitated a moment whether he should give his name: but immediately recollecting that the woman need only describe his personal appearance in order to make her master understand who the visitor was, he said boldly, "Mr. Dan'el Coffin of Fleet Lane."

"Ah!" she ejaculated, her looks filling with evident disgust and horror as the mention of that name, striking upon her ear like a pestilence upon the entire frame, revealed to her the fact that she stood in the presence of the public executioner. "Good morning—good morning," she hurriedly observed, as she flew to open the front door with an undisguised longing for the departure of so unwelcome a visitant.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Coffin, not choosing to take any notice of her altered manner: and he issued from the house.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE CONSULTATION.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening of the same day, that the Hangman knocked at the door of Bencull's dark crib in Mill Street, Jacob's Island. He was no longer apparelled in his Sunday's best—having put off his gala-garb on his return home from Larry Sampson's house; and he was now attired in his usual coarse and ruffian-looking style.

"Who's there?" demanded the well-known voice of Bencull from within.

"Mr. Dan'el Coffin," was the answer, accompanied by a peculiar whistle.

"All right!" said Bencull: and the next moment the door was opened.

"Anybody here yet?" demanded the Hangman, as he entered the passage of that ominous-looking house.

"No—nobody yet," replied Bencull, as he closed and bolted the street door.

"So much the better," observed Coffin: "because I want to speak to you very particular indeed."

The two men proceeded into the back room which has been described in a previous chapter: liquor and pipes were produced;—and when the glasses were filled and the blue wreaths of the tobacco-smoke were curling upward, Bencull said, "Now, old fellow, what is it?"

"Well, my worthy friend," responded the Hangman, looking moodily solemn and savagely serious as he spoke,—"I've made a discovery to-day that regards me—you—everybody pretty nearly that we know—and thousands of folk besides."

"What the devil do you mean, Dan'el?" exclaimed the landlord of the dark crib, taking his pipe from his mouth and gazing with mingled astonishment and alarm upon his companion.

"Why, I mean that there's a man in existence," replied Coffin, "who for years past has been spreading out a great web until he has covered the whole of London with the invisible meshes. And in the middle of this web does he sit like a sharp cunning spider; while hundreds of flies are getting entangled in it without knowing it, as one may say—so that this great spider has got nothing to do but to come forth at any moment and seize upon any one of the flies that it fancies for its own precious picking. Or else maybe it will bide its time and pounce upon half-a-dozen or a dozen at a time, and of course make a terrible smash of them all."

"I say, Dan'el, I can patter flash as well as any cross-cove going," observed Bencull: "but, by jingo, if I can understand a single word of all this gibberish that you've been jabbering! Come now, let's have a bit of English: 'cos why, all that there is Greek to me."

"I can deuced soon explain myself," rejoined the Hangman. "Only fancy that Larry Sampson is this precious great spider, and that all the cross-coves, macers, magsmen, prigs, and cracksmen in London are the flies. *Now* do you understand me?"

"I begin to do so," answered Bencull; "but only just as a feller has a wacant idea of what he's about just when he's getting sober after a deuced good booze."

"Then listen," said the Hangman. "Larry Sampson has got a thundering big book, divided into three parts. In the first part he puts down the names of all people that the law looks with a suspicious eye upon; and I need hardly tell you that *your* name and *mine* ain't omitted. In the second division of the book, there's a list of all the flash cribs, fence-shops, and travellers' houses* in London; and *again* I need hardly say that *your* establishment isn't forgotten. But what's more, every soul frequenting it is also put down in Larry's book: so there's me to begin with—then Jeremy Humpage—next the Swag Chovey Bloak—then Bob the Durrynacker—the Mushroom Faker—the Highflyer of Fakements—the Buttoner—Nell Gibson—and in fact all the select company that honour Mr. Bencull's house with their presence."

"Well, I'm not over and above surprised to hear this," observed the landlord of the dark crib. "Of course, Larry Sampson knows all these things: his spies are everywhere——"

"Wait a moment, old fellow," exclaimed Coffin, "and just hear what the third part of this great book says. It's a sort of narrative or journal of all Larry's proceedings, adventures, and enter-

* The low lodging houses are thus called.

prises; and what will you think when I tell you that that knife-grinding fellow which we chucked over into the ditch, was never drowned at all, but is alive and kicking at this moment!"

"No—by jingo! is this true?" cried Bencull, turning deadly pale. "Why, 'tis enough to hang us all!"—and he put his hand to his throat, as if he already experienced the unpleasant sensation produced by the contact of a halter.

"*I* can't be hanged for it, at all events," exclaimed Daniel Coffin, "seeing that I've got the royal pardon safe and sound in my pocket. But you haven't heard quite all yet: for if you are astonished at what I've already told you, I don't know how you'll feel when I tell you that the knife-grinder and Larry Sampson were one and the same person!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Bencull, half starting from his chair, and chucking down his pipe so abruptly upon the table that it broke into a dozen pieces. "You are either mad or drunk, Dan'el: which the devil is it?"

"Neither, you fool," answered the Hangman, with one of his characteristic growls. "What I tell you is true: and more than that, I have read in the great book sufficient to show me that Larry Sampson is acquainted with the secrets of nearly the whole lot of cross-coves in London."

"But why doesn't he take us up by hundreds, and have us hung by twenties at a time?" asked Bencull, gathering courage from the reflection which prompted the query.

"Why, don't you see," exclaimed Coffin, impatiently, "that there's a wide deal of difference between knowing all these kind of things, and being able to get together the necessary evidence to convict a chap at the Old Bailey! But you *do* see that Larry is constantly nabbing fellows under extraordinary circumstances. Look how he ferrets them out—traces their whole proceedings—follows

them as one may say step by step, from the moment they plan a crime till the instant it is completed—brings the whole mass of evidence to burst like a storm around them—and sends them to the scaffold at last! Don't you see this constantly being done, I say?—and isn't it often a matter of wonder how Larry *does* contrive to bring things home to people? Well then, now it ceases to be a matter of wonder, after all that I have seen and learnt to-day."

The Hangman then proceeded to inform his friend Bencull how he had penetrated into Larry Sampson's private apartment, and how he had beheld there all the costumes and other accessories for an infinite variety of complete disguises. Bencull was as much amazed and as thoroughly petrified with wonder at hearing this recital, as Coffin himself had been when first entering that mysterious apartment at Sampson's house. Indeed, several minutes elapsed ere Bencull could recover in the slightest degree from that stupor into which he was thus plunged.

"Well, there is one thing I can't understand," he said at length, when he had lighted another pipe and taken a few whiffs. "How was it that within an hour after Larry Sampson escaped from the ditch behind this house, he did not have you and me and all the others taken up and lodged in Newgate at once?"

"Oh! I can understand his reason full well," returned the Hangman. "You was one of the party that did that job with the Prince and Marquis of Leveson at Beechy Manor—"

"Well, what of that?" exclaimed Bencull.

"Only that Larry Sampson, as it appears by his book, was employed to sift that affair to the bottom," continued Daniel Coffin; "and the better to follow out his researches, he took the disguise of a knife-grinder—first going down to Richmond to make inquiries there, and then coming down here. Now, if he had handed us all over to justice, he would have had to say why he came to the dark crib, so as to make out his tale;—and that would have been to tell on what special service he was engaged at the time, and consequently to proclaim to the whole world what had happened to the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson on a certain memorable night. But as neither the Prince nor the Marquis wanted it known at all,—but on the contrary, had certain reasons of their own for wishing it to be kept deuced quiet,—Larry Sampson thought it best to hold his peace about his adventure down here."

"Well, all this may be likely enough," said Bencull: "but still it's quite clear that Larry knows a great deal more than is convenient. And now I recollect, the night when he was down here disguised as a knife-grinder, he went up-stairs and saw old Jeremy Humpage——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Hangman: "never mind anything about the details of what happened on that particular night. What we have chiefly to think about at present, is whether we are to take any step to insure our safety for the future."

"In what way?" asked Bencull, with that kind of ominously significant look which showed that he had caught an inkling of the idea then uppermost in the Hangman's mind. "Come, speak out, Dan'el: you and me are old pals, and can trust each other."

"Then my mind is made up as to Larry Sampson," answered Coffin. "It's quite clear that no business is to be done in future with any degree of safety, as long as Larry is alive. He has got a halter round *your* neck—and round the necks of all our pals and confederates—and he won't be long before he gets one round *my* neck again also. And when it is considered that he can pull these halters tight at any moment he chooses, by Satan! to make away with such a fellow would be conferring a blessing on the whole fraternity."

"You and me, Dan'el," observed Bencull, jerking his pipe towards the back of the house, "have shoved out more than one stiff 'un into the black ditch; and therefore I don't see why we should hesitate in making a croaker of Mr. Larry Sampson."

"To be sure not—and it shall be done!" cried the Hangman. "But we must also take measures to get possession of his book at the same time that we do his business for him: or else, if that great volume fell into the hands of another officer, it would soon put him into the right way of becoming as knowing—and consequently as dangerous as Larry Sampson himself."

"Well, have you got any scheme in your head?" demanded Bencull.

"Larry Sampson must be enticed down here," said the Hangman, "by some means or another; and while you and two or three of our most trustworthy pals are doing his business for him, I will call at his house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the great book."

"Well and good," said Bencull. "But how the deuce do you hope to entice Larry to trust himself again in the dark crib?"

"Cunning as he is, let us see if we can't be more cunning still. What think you of planting some woman upon him to make him believe that through revenge she wants to betray a scheme in which her flash man is engaged? This looks so devilish nat'ral, if we could only get a blowen of the right sort to carry it out."

"What say you to Nell Gibson?" demanded Bencull. "She's the most artfullest gal which I ever happened to be acquainted with—besides which, she's got such a way of looking so precious innocent and sincere when she's really plotting the deepest mischief."

"Yes—we'll make use of Nell Gibson in this matter. But are you quite sure that Nell is the most trustworthy young woman that we could employ in the matter? You know her better than I do."

"Why, my maxim always is never to trust any woman farther than you can see her," replied Bencull: "and therefore it's my advice that while setting Nell Gibson to work against Larry Sampson, we should also set somebody to watch Nell Gibson."

"A very capital plan of your's, old fellow," observed the Hangman. "And now, taking it for granted that Nell Gibson will embark in this business, who shall we plant in turn upon her?"

"Well, of all covies that ever come to this house," answered Bencull, after a few moments' reflection, "that Buttoner, or thimble-rig feller, is the downiest. Besides which, he's been raythor sweet upon Nell Gibson for some time past: but Nell won't have nothing to say to him because he's down in his luck, and hasn't done over well lately. If we was only to rig him out with new toggery from head to foot—give

him a few cooters to flash about with—and set him up in Swell Street, Nell would precious soon take up with him, 'cos he's not a bad-looking chap by no means."

"Well, I don't mind venturing fifteen or twenty guineas for this part of the business," observed the Hangman; "and you can therefore make it all right with the Buttoner."

"Agreed," said Bencull.

The Hangman accordingly produced his pocket-book and drew forth bank notes to the amount of twenty pounds, which he handed to his accomplice; then rising from his seat, he said, "I will go and see Nell Gibson at once. She lives at Mother Young's—don't she?"

"Yes—where that old witch Mother Franklin is," replied Bencull.

"To be sure,—I know all about it. I've been there often enough before. So I'll just go and make it all right with Nell, and will then come back to take another glass with you. Perhaps I shall bring her with me."

Daniel Coffin then quitted the dark crib.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

NELL GIBSON.

Turning abruptly out of Mill Street into the narrow passage that went shelving down towards the black ditch, the Hangman hastily traversed the ricketty old wooden bridge—pausing only for an instant to cast a look down on that stagnant water, the surface of which seemed like black marble as the feeble moonlight played upon it. Cutting straight through the fearful rookery constituting Jacob's Island, he passed over another bridge on the farther side, and at once plunged into the maze of vile, narrow, dark, and filthy streets in the immediate vicinage.

In a few minutes Daniel Coffin reached a street somewhat wider and to all appearances more respectable than the rest; and presently he paused at a house whose shutters, blinds, and door were all green. A subdued light shone forth from every window; and the sounds of several female voices emanated from the front room on the ground-floor. The Hangman knocked at the door, which was opened by a very stout red-faced woman of fifty. She was dressed in a shabby black silk gown: a faded neckerchief, that once had displayed the gaudiest colours, was thrown over her immense shoulders;—and a dirty cap, adorned with tawdry ribands, was set awry upon her head, either through a lingering sentiment of coquetry which had not deserted her though she had fallen into the sere and yellow leaf,—or else for the less romantic reason of having been thrust aside in some scuffle. She wore a false front to conceal the hair which years of debauchery had tended even more than time to rob of its pristine darkness: the tip of her nose was rubicund and shining;—and if any other evidence had been wanting to prove her devotion to the bottle, it might have been perceived in the strong odour of the juniper which infested her breath. A trumpery mosaic chain hung round her great thick neck; and two or three flaring rings of base metal, set with great pieces of coloured glass, were stuck upon her very dirty fingers.

She held a candle in her hand: and the moment the light fell upon the Hangman's countenance, she exclaimed, "Ah! Mr. Coffin, is that you? Well, I raly am delighted to see you alive again, after hearing as how you was dead and feeding the fishes in the Thames. But howsomever you are not looking the wuss for your late adventures."

"Not a bit, mother: they did me good, on the contrary," observed the Hangman, with a low chuckle, and with as amiable a look as such a hang-dog countenance as his own could possibly assume: "besides which, you see, I've resumed office at the Old Bailey again."

"I read all about it, Mr. Coffin, in the newspapers," returned the woman; "and I was struck all of a heap when I seed how sudden you turned up again. But I hope," she added with a leering smile of coarse familiarity, "that if so be I should come to Tuck-up Fair to dance upon nothing, you'll treat me as a lady should be treated at a gentleman's hands."

"That I will, mother," exclaimed Coffin, with a laugh which almost sounded ominous to the woman's ears, and made her repent of her joke as it sent a shudder coldly quivering through her frame. "Depend upon it that if ever you come to be taught the fall of a leaf in the Old Bailey, I'll make the hempen neckcloth as comfortable for your old neck as possible; and I'll let the drop fall so gentle under your feet, that you shall slide down as easy as a boy off a haystack."

"Well, come in—come in, Mr. Coffin," said Mrs. Young, somewhat impatiently, as if she had had quite enough of that terrible tragi-comic jesting. "Come in, I say, and wash your mouth out with a drop of summat short."

Thus speaking, the woman led the way into the little front parlour, where an immense fire blazed in the grate, giving forth a stifling heat. Huddled together on an old faded ricketty sofa, sate four young women, whose faces highly coloured with rouge, shameless exposure of the bosom, and immodest looks, but too plainly announced their avocation. Lounging in an arm-chair near the fire, sate Nell Gibson, with one of her feet upon an old footstool, and the other resting upon the hob—while her form was thrown back with a lascivious abandonment mingled with reckless indolence. She was however dressed more neatly and carefully than the girls upon the sofa, whose apparel was a mixture of poverty-stricken meanness and scantiness, disguised and embellished as much as possible by tawdry finery. But Nell Gibson wore a good stuff dress, cut very low in front so as to display the really fine bust which had not yet entirely lost the first freshness of youth. Her arms too were bare: but they were plump and white;—the hands were not only well made, but also scrupulously clean;—and her well shaped legs were provided with clean white stockings and a new pair of shoes. In fine, this young woman was altogether of a beauty that shone in remarkable contrast with the faded forms and worn-out looks of the girls upon the sofa. For, alas! although these latter females were still but mere girls as to age, yet were they old women—yes, old, old women in sad experience, and also in the waste and ruin of those charms which, even at the age of one or two-and-twenty, required cosmetics to conceal the ravages of dissipation!

Having paid his respects to Nell Gibson and the other females, the Hangman desired Mrs. Young to produce a couple of bottles of wine; and as he threw down a guinea at the same moment the woman bustled about with alacrity to give the necessary order. An old harridan of nearly ninety, bent double with age and who had passed the whole of her long life in houses of crime, acted as Mrs. Young's servant; and she was accordingly despatched to the nearest public-house to fetch the wine. When she returned and placed the bottles upon the table, the Hangman exclaimed in a bantering tone, "Halloa! Mother Franklin, are you still alive?"

"Yes, you see I be," answered the old hag, wagging her toothless jaws with a merry laugh.

"Why, how old are you now, you witch?" demanded the Hangman.

"Eighty-nine, come next Febiverry," responded the hag; "and you'll never reach that age, Mr. Coffin—for you're doomed to go out of the world in the same way as you've helped a many others to quit it:" and she laughed with a hideous cackling sound that presently merged into a choking cough which brought the scalding rheum into her bleared eyes.

"By Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, ferociously, "I shall have the satisfaction of tucking you up before I die, you infernal old beldame! Why, I don't believe you were ever in a respectable house in your life?"

"That's true enough," answered the hag, with her horrible chuckle. "I was born in such a house as this—I was bred in it—I became prematurely old in it," she continued, glancing significantly towards the girls upon the sofa. "I have been the child of crime—the mother of crime—and the widow of crime: and now I may say I am the great, great grandmother of crime! Lord bless ye, you won't see one in a thousand—no, nor yet one in a million—that comes to my age after passing all one's life in such houses as this here! They mostly die in ditches—or on dunghills—or in hospitals or workhouses—long, long before they come to even half my age!"

"Hold your tongue, you old witch!" ejaculated Nell Gibson, half starting from her chair in a rage. "I declare if you're allowed to let your tongue run on like this, I'll leave the house."

"It's shameful to let Mother Franklin talk just as she likes," observed the young females upon the sofa: but *they* did not threaten to leave the house—for they were entirely in Mrs. Young's power; whereas Nell Gibson was totally independent of the woman.

"There—take that, you old beldame, and be off!" said the Hangman savagely, tossing her a shilling.

Mother Franklin, who had thrown a look of diabolical spite upon Nell Gibson when she threatened to leave the house, now fastened the same malignant look upon the Hangman, muttering to herself, "What! only a shilling—a beggarly shilling, for fetching that wine and standing all this abuse:" then suddenly picking up the coin, she bustled out of the room, laughing with that hideous laugh which was between a cackle and a cough.

The Hangman, perceiving that he had just drawn the ancient harridan into a conversation which had thrown a damp upon the spirits of those present, hastened to pour out the wine and pass round the glasses, the contents of which were speedily disposed of. The girls upon the sofa were specially prompt in emptying their glasses; and they looked particularly satisfied when Mr. Coffin refilled them. Then, after chatting on various subjects for about a quarter of an hour, the Hangman said to Nell Gibson, "I want to speak to you upon very particular business."

She looked at him for a moment with a strange gaze, in which astonishment, indignation, and disgust were all clearly and plainly blended: then suddenly bursting out into a loud laugh, she said, "No, Mr. Coffin—any living soul but the public executioner!"

"What does the girl mean?" growled the Hangman, his countenance all of a sudden assuming a look of diabolical ferocity: but the next moment, recollecting that it was his policy to conciliate instead of angering Ellen Gibson, he said in as mild a tone as it was in his nature to adopt, "I didn't mean any tender proposal, Nell: but it's on a matter of business I want to speak to you—and so if you'll just put on your bonnet and shawl and step out with me, we can chat as we walk up and down the street: or may be you would step round as far as Bencull's for half-an-hour or so."

"No—I don't want to go out to night," said Nell: it's raw and damp, and I've got a cold. But we can talk here:"—and she made a sign to Mother Young and the four girls, who all took the hint accordingly and quitted the room. "Now, then, what is it?" inquired the young woman, still retaining her indolent attitude as she lolled in the arm-chair near the fire.

"And so you wouldn't have accepted me as your lover?" said the Hangman, with a jocose look, as he really began to feel somewhat excited by the provoking abandonment of the young woman's fine person in that attitude of indolent wantonness.

"Faugh! there is a smell about you as if you had been touching dead bodies," replied Nell, who was of a very independent spirit and did not mind saying what she thought: indeed, vile, depraved, remorseless prostitute as she was, and ready also to sell herself to even the most disgusting old men so long as she was adequately paid, she nevertheless recoiled in unfeigned loathing and aversion from the idea of such contact with the public executioner.

"Well, at all events you are candid, Nell," said Daniel Coffin after a brief pause, during which he bit his lip almost till the blood came, so desperate for a moment was his vexation at the disgust with which the young woman regarded him. "But come,—it's no use for you and me to wrangle while there's business to be done: so I suppose we are all good friends again?"

"To be sure," answered Nell, instantaneously recovering her good humour: "so long as you don't talk to me in a particular way, we shall be the best friends in the world, as we always have been hitherto;—and if there's anything to be done in which my services can be made handy, you know very well that you can command me."

"I am glad to hear you speak in this sensible way," said Coffin, laying aside all his recent resentment: "because there really is something important on hand. You recollect that night, down at the dark crib, when you enticed a young lady there——"

"To be sure!—and she had plenty of trinkets and a well-filled purse," exclaimed Nell, "out of all which we were shamefully bilked. But what of her?"

"Oh! nothing about *her*: but you remember that rascally knife-grinding fellow that undertook to send her into kingdom-come?"

"As if it was possible to forget that man whom we sent to sleep at the bottom of the black ditch," said the young woman, her tone and her looks both suddenly becoming serious.

"Yes—but what will you think," exclaimed the Hangman, "when I tell you that the fellow does not sleep at the bottom of the black ditch at all—but on the contrary must have been awoke into consciousness and life when plunged into that slimy pool?—and what else will you think when I tell you that not only is that knife-grinder safe and sound in the land of the living, but that he is none other than our mortal enemy Larry Sampson?"

With a surprise that rapidly increased into a speechless wonderment, did Nell Gibson hear the announcements thus made by Daniel Coffin: and even before she could so far recover from this stupefaction as to be able to give utterance to a word, did the Hangman proceed to recite the same account as he had already given to Bencull concerning his visit to Larry Sampson's house and the discoveries he had made through the agency of the great book. We need hardly say that Nell Gibson's surprise soon became commingled with alarm and dismay: for there were many episodes in her career which she had hitherto fancied to be utterly unsuspected by the myrmidons of justice, but which, from what the Hangman now told her, were indeed too well known to Larry Sampson. It was true that, save and except her share in the attempt to murder the officer when disguised as a knife-grinder, there was no enormous crime which could positively and unquestionably be brought home to her: otherwise, perhaps, Larry would not have allowed her to remain at large so long;—but it was quite clear that he knew *more* about her than was pleasant to be thus known, and that such knowledge of her antecedents would render her future career an object of constant suspicion and surveillance, thereby planting as it were a thousand hidden dangers in her way.

When, therefore, the Hangman proposed that she should embark in some enterprise the aim of which was nothing less than the murder of the Bow Street Officer, she experienced no compunction in giving a prompt and even cheerful assent to the scheme. Coffin then proceeded to develop his views, in the discussion of which the extraordinary keenness and astuteness of the young woman afforded no inconsiderable help, leading to many practical suggestions of importance to the infernal project. Finally, after a lengthened deliberation, the Hangman and Nell Gibson came to a complete understanding together; and the former, taking leave of Mother Young's establishment, returned to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, to report to Bencull the success of his mission.

But little did either Daniel Coffin or Nell Gibson suspect that throughout their private interview and important colloquy, old Mother Franklin—the toothless harridan belonging to Mrs. Young's establishment—had been listening eagerly and breathlessly at the key-hole of the parlour door.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

VENETIA AND HER ADMIRERS.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the occurrences just related;—and it was now the middle of November—that month of short days and dark fogs in which Englishmen are reputed to show a greater predilection for suicide than at any other season of the year.

On the particular evening of which we are about to write, the Prince Regent was entertaining at his dinner-table Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Earl of Curzon. The reader will therefore perceive that it was quite a select little party; and Venetia, being the only lady present, was of course compelled to render herself as agreeable as possible. We were wrong, however, to use the word *compelled*: because the beautiful creature possessed that admirable tact, lady-like discernment, and natural flow of spirits, which always enabled her to be affable and agreeable without an effort; and the spells of fascination seemed to belong as naturally to her manners as loveliness hung like a charm upon her person, or as the sweetest and richest melody poured itself forth in the tones of her voice.

It will be remembered that the Earl of Curzon had cherished a great deal of animosity towards Venetia, not only for having rejected his advances, but also for having bestowed her hand upon Horace Sackville: and the reader may likewise suppose that Venetia on her side did not immediately forget the cowardly threats which the Earl had held forth when he visited her at Acacia Cottage, or the malignant irony of his manner when he *congratulated* her immediately after the ceremony at St. George's, Hanover Square. But when Horace and Venetia became not only Lord and Lady Sackville, but also took up their quarters at Carlton House and were at once admitted by the acclamation of the whole fashionable world to be the idols of the day,—no sooner, we say, were the newly-married couple thus elevated on so lofty a pedestal, than the Earl of Curzon was one of the first to pay his court to them. For he felt that to be at war with Horace and Venetia, would amount to total exclusion from the banquets, the balls, and the soirées at Carlton House; and to such exclusion the Earl's vanity would not permit him to submit. Swallowing, therefore, his resentment and putting the best possible face upon the matter, he had hastened to make his peace with the Sackvilles; and they had succeeded too well in their ambitious projects not to be able to afford forgiveness in this respect. Indeed, it had become a part of the conventional tactics of Horace and Venetia not to make enemies if they could prevent it, and to disarm all existing hostilities, so as to afford as little impulse as possible to the ill-natured things which were certain to be said relative to individuals who had experienced so sudden and remarkable an elevation to rank, fortune, and power.

The Earl of Curzon was a consummate hypocrite when it suited his purpose to act with duplicity; and no sooner had he made his peace with the Sackvilles, when he became most fervid in his

demonstrations of friendship towards them. He made Lord Sackville a present of a splendid horse; and he now and then sent Venetia beautiful bouquets of flowers, the newly-published prints, and such gifts as a gentleman may without indiscretion proffer to a lady. All this he did without any obtrusiveness or any apparently interested motive: his visits were not more frequent than they ought to be;—and he invariably behaved with the most courteous respect towards Lady Sackville. The result was that his past conduct was at length pretty well forgotton; and though he was not perhaps regarded in the light of a friend, he at all events was considered as a very intimate acquaintance.

And now a word or two with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Upwards of a fortnight had elapsed since that memorable evening on which the Baronet and Venetia had met in the ante-room leading to the saloon where the aristocratic young ladies had made a pastime of dancing and throwing flowers around the Prince. During this fortnight Sir Douglas, emboldened by the encouragement which Venetia appeared to give him upon that occasion, had become a more frequent visitor at the suite of apartments which she and Horace occupied at Carlton House; and it is quite certain that he received no discouragement on the part of Venetia. On the contrary, she always managed to be "at home" to *him*; and when he took his leave of her on each occasion, she generally contrived to give him a hint as to the most convenient hour for him to call the next day. At the outset of these visits, he had ventured to press her hand to his lips; and the chiding he received was so gentle that it did not prevent him from snatching a kiss from the damask cheek. At the next visit, therefore—as this boldness on his part had excited but a moderate degree of resentment,—he was venturous enough to cull the sweets of her delicious mouth. This liberty experienced no very cruel chastisement; and therefore Sir Douglas felt himself justified in cherishing the fervid hope that ere long these little favours which he obtained in detail would be crowned by the complete surrender of the fortress.

Thus stood matters at the time specified at the opening of this chapter; namely, on that evening in the middle of November when we thus find the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon dining with the Prince Regent.

It was about nine o'clock—the dessert had just been placed upon the table—and the wine was beginning to circulate pretty freely, save with respect to Venetia herself. Nevertheless, a little champagne which she had taken at dinner, and the glass of fine old port which she was just sipping now, had slightly enhanced the bloom upon her cheeks—deepening it into a richer carnation—while her beautiful blue eyes appeared to swim in a more softly sensuous and melting languor. Delicious, too, was the dewy moisture of those lips which seemed to invite the tenderest kisses, and to be able to give them back again;—and as the lustre of the lamps shone upon her rich auburn hair, crowning her with light and setting forth the grandeur of her forehead in all its alabaster purity, she appeared to be one of those beings who can only have an ideal existence in the verse of the poet or the page of the novelist.

It was about half-past nine, when a footman entered and whispered something in the ear of the Prince.

"Show his lordship up immediately," exclaimed his Royal Highness aloud: then, so soon as the servant had retired, he observed, "It is Leveson, who has just come back from Paris: and as a matter of course he will be welcome amongst us."

"Oh! assuredly," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "But what did he go to Paris for?"

"Ah! that, I suppose, is *his* secret," replied the Prince, who however knew full well wherefore the Marquis had gone so suddenly abroad more than a month previously, and why he had remained so long in the French capital.

The Marquis of Leveson now made his appearance; and when the usual greetings and complimentary phrases were exchanged, he took a seat on the left hand of the Prince,—Venetia being on the right of his Royal Highness. The conversation was continued upon general subjects for some time: but presently, when Lord Sackville, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had become involved in a warm though friendly discussion upon some moot-point, to which Venetia was listening with great interest, the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson seized the opportunity to exchange a few hurried and whispered observations.

"What news?" inquired the Prince.

"Did you not receive letters from me yesterday, stating that I should be home to day?" asked Leveson.

"Yes," replied the Prince. "And nothing, I suppose, is changed since the date at which you wrote those letters?"

"Nothing," returned the Marquis. "As you are aware, Julia Owen has gone on to rejoin her sisters in Italy——"

"Yes—that I know well enough," interrupted the Prince; "and she must have reached them by this time. Why, it is a fortnight since you despatched her from Paris, on the failure of that precious affair between her and the falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus."

At the mention of this name, which caught Venetia's ear, she gave a start—though it was unperceived by any one present. Then, while apparently continuing to listen with interest to the discussion between her husband, the Earl, and the Baronet, she in reality lent an earnest and attentive ear to the whispered and confidential discourse that was going on between the Prince Regent and the Earl of Leveson. The latter proceeded to make certain observations relative to Jocelyn Loftus, which revealed to the ears of Venetia a remarkable secret in connexion with that young gentleman,—showing to her how it was that the Prince had ere now spoken of him as the *falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus*.

But why is Venetia interested in aught that concerns Jocelyn Loftus?—does she know him?—has she ever seen him? In a word, wherefore has her heart begun to flutter like a frightened bird in its cage?—and why does it need all her resolution—all her firmness—all her presence of mind to prevent the betrayal of those emotions which the mention of this name has suddenly excited within her bosom?

We cannot answer these questions at present;—and therefore must we pursue, without delay, the thread of our narrative.

"And is he still in the Prefecture?" inquired the

Prince, continuing the whispered discourse with Leveson, while Venetia was straining every sense to catch each word that passed between them.

"Yes," returned the Marquis. "What else could possibly be done with him? He is proof against all temptation: his virtue would put the old Stoic philosophers to shame;—and if he were set at large he would blow to the winds all that fine scheme which, if successful, will relieve you from the trammels of your accursed marriage."

"But will the French Government consent to retain him a prisoner much longer?" asked the Prince. "Seeing that the pretext is so shallow, I fear lest it should be under the necessity of setting him at liberty."

"Not at all," returned the Marquis. "King Louis acknowledges his obligation to succour your Royal Highness to the utmost of his power—and he pledged himself to me to do so."

"Then the imprisonment of that madbrained, obstinate young man is likely to be prolonged indeed?" said the Prince. "But what have you done with that beautiful Louisa Stanley of whom you wrote to me in such glaring colours?"

"Would you believe it, sir—I have brought her back from Paris and managed to entice her to Albemarle Street," said the Marquis, with a leer of most sensual satisfaction.

"Do you mean to say that you have already won that prize?" asked the Prince.

"No—no—not yet. I have been playing the paternal—and she looks up to me quite as a father. She has got a sister somewhere in London: but she has evidently mistaken the address of this sister's residence. However, I will tell you all about this another time: suffice it to say that Louisa is a charming creature—and I have obtained such influence over——"

The whispered dialogue between the Prince and the Marquis, and the animated discussion on the part of Sackville, Curzon, and Huntingdon, were both alike interrupted at this particular moment by the circumstance of Venetia suddenly upsetting her wine-glass by a too abrupt movement which she made: and as the wine was spilt upon the rich satin dress that she wore, she started from her seat, evidently much confused and chagrined at an accident which had drawn all eyes upon her. Then faltering forth a few words of apology, she hurried from the room.

Hastening to her own chamber, she threw herself upon the sofa and fell into a profound reverie. Painful it no doubt was; for her troubled spirit seemed to look through the eyes that were bent down fixedly, beaming not with a voluptuous languor now:—painful, too, that reverie was, because the colour had fled from her cheeks and an unrelieved pallor sate upon her countenance. Presently she pressed her hand forcibly to her heart, as if to still its throbbings: and that superb bosom which was wont to swell so warmly and glowingly with amorous emotions, now appeared to palpitate beneath the empire of other and far different thoughts.

But suddenly starting from the sofa, she assumed a look of forced composure—that look which an energetic woman puts on, when, in the presence of dangers, difficulties, or annoyances suddenly starting up before her, she resolves to adopt a decisive course. Ringing the bell to summon her faithful attendant Jessica, Venetia hastened to put off the soiled dress and array herself in another robe. Then, ere she quitted the chamber, she said to Jessica—"You must hasten up to Stratton Street at once, and tell Miss Bathurst that it is probable inquiries may be made for a certain person and that she must be upon her guard accordingly. Whisper this much in Miss Bathurst's ear: or if Miss Bathurst should not happen to be at home, tell it to Mrs. Arbuthnot, and the meaning of the message will be thoroughly understood."

Having given these instructions, Lady Sackville descended to the saloon belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband occupied at Carlton House;—and after remaining there for a short time, until she had entirely regained an outward appearance of calmness as well as some of the lost carnation hues upon her cheeks, she rang the bell and ordered her serious-looking valet, who answered the summons, to go and inform his Royal Highness and his guests that she should be happy to see them to take coffee with her.

Half-an-hour afterwards, the Prince, the Marquis, the Earl, and the Baronet, accompanied of course by Lord Sackville himself, repaired to the saloon where Venetia was thus awaiting their presence: and as the company partook of the fragrant coffee and the choice liqueurs which followed, she conversed as gaily and as cheerfully as if she had experienced no sudden paroxysm of low spirits during the entire evening.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had seated himself next to her at the tea-table: and the influence of the wine he had drunk, mingling with that of her transcendent charms and the melody of her fluid voice, filled him with a species of delirious intoxication which rendered all control of his feelings a matter of utter impossibility. Availing himself, therefore, of a moment when no one else observed him, and hurried along by an irresistible current of ecstatic emotions, he whispered, "By heaven! Venetia, you are adorable to-night! O for one hour of your love—and I would cheerfully resign all the remainder of my existence to enjoy it!"

"Are you serious?—and would you do me a great—a very great service?" she inquired, in a low deep whisper, accompanying her words by a look which seemed to blend a profound earnestness of purpose with a tender intimation that she was willing to pay the highest price which woman can give for the service to which she had just alluded.

"Tell me what I can do for you, adorable being!" murmured the enraptured Baronet: "and I will peril my life in your service."

Venetia threw a hurried glance around; and perceiving that this rapid and whispered colloquy at the tea-table was still unobserved, she darted a sudden look of vivid intelligence upon the Baronet, saying in an equally hurried but low-breathed tone at the same time, "I will write presently upon a slip of paper that which I should blush to say in your presence!"

Having thus given a sort of promise to which the Baronet instantaneously attached the tenderest and most delicious interpretation, Venetia rose from her seat;—and crossing the room, she threw herself upon a sofa at the farther end, as if to get as far as possible from the heat of the very large fire that was blazing in the grate.

The Earl of Curzon now approached her; and negligently taking a seat by her side, he began to converse upon a variety of those topics which make up the sum of fashionable discourse. But Venetia was pre-occupied with other and more important matters,—so that at times she fell into a pensive mood, from which she would suddenly start and then gaze upon the Earl with a look of vacant inquiry, as if in wonder at what he had been saying. In fact, there was altogether a peculiarity in her manner which she could not control, and which she even rendered more strange by attempting to subdue it, or to repair the awkwardness of its effects.

Now the Earl of Curzon had been drinking freely: and the wine had produced upon him a certain excitement which the magic of Venetia's charms speedily enhanced to an almost frenzied degree. Thus, losing his head as it were in the fumes of the generous grape and in the intoxicating influences of his own desires, he mistook that peculiarity of Venetia's manner for the embarrassment and confusion attendant upon a favourable feeling experienced towards himself. His vanity assisted this belief: and thus blindly abandoning himself to it, he ventured to touch Venetia's hand with a significant tenderness. She perceived the circumstance and threw upon him a glance which was about to shoot forth the fires of indignation, when all in a moment the truth flashed to her mind. She remembered that her manner had been strange and pre-occupied; and this recollection furnished her with the key to the mystery of the Earl's conduct. Yes—it was quite clear: he fancied she was in love with him, and that all the last half-hour's absence of mind and pre-occupation were the proofs of this affection on her part!

Thus was it that the sudden flashing of the truth to her comprehension checked the indignation which her looks were about to pour forth upon the Earl;—and at the same moment another thought sprang up in her mind. But this second thought was of importance to herself,—suggestive as it was of a means by which she could render the Earl serviceable in certain matters upon which she had this night resolved.

Suffering, therefore, her hand to remain in contact with his own, she bent upon him a look into which she threw as much tenderness and encouragement as she dared without incurring the risk of being deemed too ready to accept his overtures and too willing to fling herself into his arms.

"Have you forgiven me for the insolence of my conduct on the first day of our acquaintance?" he inquired, in a low voice.

"Most assuredly," she softly answered. "Has not my conduct proved this much?"

"Ah! if I dared to hope," murmured the Earl, with a sigh.

"If I were to bid you hope," whispered Venetia, after a few instants' pause, and speaking as if in obedience to the sudden impulse of a feeling stronger than herself,—"would you be ready to perform any service which I might demand?"

"Did you order me to kill myself at your feet as a proof of my devotion," responded the Earl, transported with raptures and incredulous even to the amount of that happiness which the present discourse inspired,—"I would do it unhesitatingly—Oh! unhesitatingly this moment!"

"And you swear by your God, and by your honour as a man," whispered Venetia, earnestly and even solemnly, "that you will keep secret whatever may pass between us?"

"I will—I will," answered the Earl. "I would sooner die than deceive you!"

Venetia appeared satisfied with this reply: for her looks brightened up, and she threw upon the nobleman a glance of mingled gratitude and tenderness. Then, after reflecting deeply for a few moments, she said, "I cannot tell you more now—but presently I will slip a note into your hand."

Having given the Earl this assurance, which seemed to promise joys and favours that should crown him with a triumph and a bliss which even an hour before appeared to be not merely incalculably remote but scarcely probable or possible at all—having thus breathed those honied words of hope, we say, Venetia rose from the sofa and advanced towards the Prince and the others who were standing in a group before the fire and conversing upon some animated topic of politics.

But as Venetia thus drew near, that topic, usually considered to be so unwelcome to ladies, was instantly abandoned; and the Prince, fixing his eyes upon his beautiful mistress, said, "Is your ladyship inclined to favour us with music? or are we to betake ourselves to cards?"

"I am somewhat indisposed this evening, sir," answered Venetia, "and cannot sing. Indeed, it is my intention to retire early: but if you will agree to amuse yourselves with cards, I am sure that Horace will himself make you a bowl of curaçoa punch according to that receipt which you have all on former occasions pronounced to be so fine. I presume your Royal Highness does not wish us to stand on ceremony?" added Venetia, with one of her most winning and fascinating smiles: "and no one beyond these walls need know that the Lord Steward of the Regent's Household condescends to manufacture punch."

There was a great deal of laughing and joking at this proposition so goodnaturedly and humorously made; and we need hardly say that it was at once accepted. The Prince, the Marquis, the Earl, and the Baronet sate down to whist; and Lord Sackville retired into his dining-room to make the punch. Thither he was presently followed by Venetia; and as she assured herself that he had every ingredient he required, she observed in a low tone and with a sudden pouting of her beautiful lips, "After all, I am sorry that I proposed this very inebriating mixture."

"And wherefore?" asked her husband, astonished at the remark.

"Because," she replied, with a downcast look and a glow upon her cheeks, "as I just quitted the saloon, the Prince made a sign which I could not but too well understand ——"

"Ah! I know what you mean," observed Sackville, biting his lip. "The Prince means to pass the night with you."

But the blush almost immediately passed away from Venetia's countenance, and the pang which shot through her husband's heart was only momentary: for the delicacy of feeling which had conjured up the former and produced the latter, was almost completely extinguished within their breasts so far as their connexion as man and wife was concerned.

Alas! alas! that such dread depravity should have prevailed where there was so much beauty, such intelligence, and such naturally god-like qualities on either side!

Venetia now left her husband to continue the manufacture of the punch, while she hastened up to her own boudoir: and sitting down to her writing desk, she penned the following note, which she intended for the Earl of Curzon:—

"I promised that I would slip a few lines into your hand; and I keep my word. The reason why I thus commit myself to paper is to furnish you with a proof of my sincerity, so that in return you may hesitate not to render me the great and important service which I require at your hands. Come to me to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock. I will receive you in my boudoir, where we may converse for half-an-hour without restraint.

"VENETIA."

Having penned this note in her beautiful fluent hand, Lady Sackville took another piece of paper and wrote thereon the following words, intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon:—

"I promised that I would slip a note into your hand this evening; and I keep my word. Yes—I love thee; and I accept thy love in return! The reason why I write these lines is because I can make upon paper that appointment which I should never have dared to breathe with my lips The punch will be strong: you can affect to be overcome by it; and Sackville will offer you a chamber for the night in our suite of apartments. I shall be *alone* in my boudoir, the door of which faces the marble statue of Diana in the gallery.

"VENETIA."

Having concluded this second billet, Venetia proceeded to fold each up into the smallest possible compass; and thrusting one into the right bosom of her dress and the other into the left, she returned to the saloon. There she found the card-playing going on and the punch already served round. At that moment, too, the Earl of Curzon

was rising from the card-tables to make room for Horace, who accordingly sat down to take a hand in the game; and Venetia now therefore found a speedy opportunity of thrusting one of the notes into the hand of the Earl of Curzon. This manœuvre was of course unperceived by everybody else; and the Earl, after flinging a look expressive of fervid gratitude upon her ladyship, quitted the room.

In a few minutes he returned; and she read in his looks the ineffable delight which filled his soul. She accordingly understood full well that he had sought an opportunity to read her billet, and that he could know not a greater happiness than that of complying with its contents.

In a short time Sir Douglas Huntingdon rose from the table, declaring that "he was in no humour to play at cards to-night;"—and the Prince Regent accordingly desired the Earl of Curzon to join the whist party again. To this request, which was a command when coming from Royalty, the nobleman immediately yielded; and Sir Douglas went and placed himself by the side of Venetia, who had taken a chair at some little distance.

Watching her opportunity, when the card-players were most intent on their game, Lady Sackville slipped the other note into the baronet's hand;—and soon afterwards, it being now past midnight, she retired to her own chamber.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE BOUDOIR.

On thus retiring to her elegant boudoir, Venetia neither rang immediately for her maid to help her to lay aside her apparel, nor did she commence her night-toilette alone: but flinging herself on the sofa near the fire, she gave way to her reflections.

A deep melancholy crept over her—and tears even stole forth upon her long dark lashes: then, as if it were a positive luxury to escape from the hollowness, the falsity, and the demoralization of a Court-life even for a few minutes, and to indulge in the unrestrained thought which the solitude of her own chamber permitted, she murmured audibly, "Yes—let me weep—let me weep!"

And Venetia wept—not violently, like the rains pouring forth from an angry heaven to beat down the fairest flowers and crush the sweetest buds of promise—but softly and gently, like the April showers descending with a genial influence to give freshness to nature's expanding verdure in garden, grove, and field. Thus did Venetia's tears fertilize as it were her memory and her heart for the time being;—and all the tenderest recollections that the former cherished, and all the sweetest feelings of woman's nature which the latter harboured, were revived into freshness and wooed into bloom by the gentle shower that fell from the deep blue heaven of her eyes.

Presently she rose from the sofa—passed behind a low screen which partitioned off one corner of the elegantly furnished boudoir—and opened a splendid bureau or cabinet made of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Thence she took forth her jewel-box: but her eyes shone not with pleasure at the view of the flashing gems which the box contained. No: for these she recked not now—and the object of her search was nothing more than a small packet of letters tied round with a simple white riband. Returning to her seat upon the sofa, Venetia began to examine these letters, which were all written in the same hand—and this hand was a beautiful female one, closely resembling her own fluid and elegant writing.

But as she ran her eyes over certain passages in that correspondence, the tears rained down her cheeks; and at length she wept so copiously that through the half blinding floods she beheld the paper and the writing on it as through a mist. But this outpouring of her heart's long pent-up feelings proved an immense relief—an incalculable solace: and wiping from her eyes the last pearl-drops which hung upon the long, dark, softly curved lashes, she tied up the packet of letters with the white riband and restored them to the jewel-box. Then, having consigned the box itself to the secure keeping of the ebony-cabinet, she rang the bell for Jessica.

The summons was not answered with the abigail's wonted promptitude—and after allowing three or four minutes' license, Venetia rang again. This time the summons was speedily responded to;—and Jessica came hurrying into the boudoir, with an apology and an explanation upon her lips for the previous neglect and delay.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon most sincerely," she said: "but I was busily engaged at the moment your ladyship's bell rang the first time, in seeing that the spare bed-room was put into order——"

"The spare bed-room!" ejaculated Venetia, affecting surprise.

"Yes, my lady," returned Jessica: "it appears that one of the guests in the saloon has taken the least drop too much——"

"Ah! indeed," said Venetia. "And who is it that has thus forgotten himself?"

"I don't know which of the guests it is, my lady," replied Jessica: "indeed, I didn't hear his name mentioned at all. My lord," she continued, alluding to Horace, "came out and gave the hurried order that the spare bed-room was to be got ready immediately—and that was the reason I did not fly to answer your ladyship's bell when it rang the first time."

"I am not angry, Jessica," said Venetia, smiling. "And while I think of it, I may as well observe that as I do not feel very well to-night, I shall perhaps take breakfast in bed in the morning. At all events you need not come to me until I ring."

"Very good, my lady," observed Jessica, as she combed out Venetia's magnificent auburn hair, which was glossy and smooth as velvet, and shining as dark gold—so luxuriant that it could be spread like a veil all over her shoulders and her bosom—and so long that it reached far below her waist.

"And you will tell the footman in the morning," continued Venetia, "in case I should forget to mention it again, that any one who calls at eleven o'clock in the forenoon punctually is to be shown straight up hither—as I expect some one on business of importance."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be attended to," said Jessica.

The night-toilette progressed: the masses of silken, auburn hair were gathered loosely up with a sort of graceful negligence beneath an elegant lace cap:—and having laid aside her apparel, Venetia dismissed her attendant for the night. Putting on a muslin wrapper, beautifully worked, and edged with the costliest lace, she threw herself upon the sofa;—and as she lay half-reclining there, the dark-purple velvet of that sofa formed a back-ground to throw forth her superb form in all its grandest and most voluptuous effects.

The gorgeous contours of the bust, left half-exposed in their dazzling whiteness by the loose wrapper,—the fine moulding of the form and the admirable proportions of the limbs, displayed by the folds of the very muslin which enveloped them,—constituted a picture so exquisitely beautiful and yet so sensuously luxurious that a saint must have worshipped Venetia as the idol of devotion, and must have sunk into her arms even though it were tasting the forbidden fruit that would entail the loss of Paradise!

But what were Venetia's thoughts as she thus lay half-reclining upon that sofa, in all the voluptuous abandonment of a rich glowing form draped only with the night-gear and the loose muslin wrapper, and in an atmosphere that was warm and perfumed? For the fire of red-hot coals was heaped high up in the grate; and three or four porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance. If anything were calculated to encourage sensations of softly longing wantonness,—the very attitude, the dress. the warmth, the perfume, the luxurious aspect of the boudoir, the silence of the hour, the mellow light shed by a lamp placed upon the table,—all these circumstances and influences were of themselves sufficient to produce that effect upon a woman of glowing temperament and who had abjured all notions of prudery. But when to these provocative and exciting causes was superadded the fact that she had given an appointment to an admirer, and that she was now every moment expecting this admirer's presence, it may well be supposed that Venetia's heart was already fluttering with desire, and that her cheeks were flushing, her eyes looking languid, and her bosom palpitating in the expectation of that deeper delirium and more frenetic whirl of pleasure into which the enjoyments of love would shortly plunge her.

But such would not have been her sensations were she expecting the Prince Regent instead of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. And here let us observe that His Royal Highness had in reality given her no intimation, ere now in the saloon, that he purposed to inflict his presence upon her this night: she had merely made the statement to her husband in order to ensure the uninterrupted privacy of her boudoir for herself and the Baronet. But now the reader will possibly ask whether Venetia experienced any genuine or sincere affection for Sir Douglas Huntingdon. No—not at all. It was but a passing whim and a phantasy of the moment that had in the first instance led her to give him the slightest encouragement on that night when they met in the ante-room and became companion-spectators of the scene that was passing the other side of the glass door on that occasion. Since then she had gone on encouraging him in the frequency of his visits—she had allowed him to become more and more familiar with her—she had also permitted him to bestow those little caresses upon her which she received without chiding,—all this she had done, we say, simply because, the barrier of virtue once broken down, she neither had the courage, the inclination, nor the self-respect sufficient to check the development of that natural wantonness which was hurrying her on into actual profligacy. Nor was it indeed likely that a young and lovely woman of fervid temperament, who had abandoned herself to the Prince, whom she loathed, in order that she might further her ambitious projects, would now hesitate to gratify a longing, however transient it might be, in which a really handsome and agreeable man like Sir Douglas Huntingdon was concerned. Moreover, Venetia required his services in a very important and delicate matter; and she therefore was willing to bestow upon him the tenderest and most precious mark of favour which a woman can possibly concede.

The reader has already seen that Venetia married Horace Sackville rather as a matter of convenience than through any other cause;—and therefore the impression which his handsome person, his fascinating manners, his fine intellect, and his ardent but short-lived devotion had made upon her during the first two or three weeks of their engagement and marriage, was rather an influence acting upon the senses than on the sentiment. It was the first stirring up and development of those naturally strong animal passions which she possessed; and therefore, as no deeper nor more tender or enduring tie bound her to her husband, it cannot be astonishing that she should so soon have turned her wanton regards elsewhere. Moreover, even if she had really and truly loved Horace at all, this affection must naturally have received a ruinous shock by the fact that within three weeks after her marriage, he—the husband of this woman of transcendent beauty—had permitted her to resign herself coldly, systematically, and deliberately into the arms of the Prince! True, all this was arranged, foreknown, and agreed upon, even before their marriage;—true, it was a joint-stock patchwork of ambitions, with deeper ramifications however than the reader has yet learnt, that had to be based upon this marriage;—true also, that after Venetia's fall there were occasional intervals of compunction, remorse, weepings, and consolings, between the guilty wife and her pander-husband;—true likewise, that their first plungings into depravity and selfishness were characterised by occasional bursts of maudlin sentiment as well perhaps as of that genuine feeling which was not altogether crushed beneath the weight of conscious infamy;—yes, true enough were all these circumstances and phases in the history of Horace and Venetia: but still, in their sober and serious moments, the wife could now only look upon the husband as the willing accomplice of her shame, and the husband could only regard the wife as a polluted profligate!

If we have paused to place all these explanatory details upon record, it has only been for the purpose of showing that Venetia was not likely to experience remorse or compunction while awaiting the presence of the admirer whom she was now expecting. On the contrary—as she lay pillowed upon the flocculent cushions of the sofa, cradled in the soft sensuousness of her own thoughts—receiving upon her slightly clad person the warmth

of that bright red fire,—in an atmosphere flooded with the serenely mellowed light, and filled with a delicious fragrance,—she seemed resolved as it were to abandon herself wholly to the pleasure of the present moment in order that she might the more deeply luxuriate in the enjoyments that were soon to come. Thus were her passions gradually exciting themselves and her desires being worked up to the highest degree, not only by the scope which she allowed her imagination to take and the bliss in which she permitted her fancy to run riot, but also by the surrounding influences of the scene.

At length, when she was becoming absolutely impatient of delay and wondering wherefore Sir Douglas Huntingdon came not, a gentle tap at the door reached her ear and thrilled like a galvanic flood of ecstacy through her entire frame. She rose —she unlocked the door—and then she flew back to the sofa, a sudden but momentary feeling of shame seizing her at the idea of appearing in that semi-nude condition in the presence of one to whose embraces she was as yet a stranger.

She heard him enter—close the door—then lock it again with strictest caution; and a moment afterwards he was by her side, snatching her in his arms and covering her with caresses. But, heavens! what words can depict the surprise—the amazement—nay, even the consternation which seized upon her, when instead of being strained to the breast of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she found herself in the arms of the Earl of Curzon!

But at the same instant—yes, at the very same moment that she made this discovery—did the truth flash to her comprehension. She must have given the wrong letter to the Earl! There could be no doubt about it: it was the only way to account for the present occurence—and moreover, it was an accident that after all might so easily have happened, seeing that neither note was addressed to any particular individual.

Thanks to that consternation which thus seized upon Venetia at the moment she found herself clasped in the arms of the Earl of Curzon, she gave vent to no cry—no ejaculation: and her presence of mind instantaneously returning, her resolve was taken almost as soon as the discovery of the misadventure itself was made. This resolve was to resign herself to circumstances! Refusal would be impossible as well as ridiculous in respect to a man who not only had her at this instant in his power, but who doubtless could also produce the letter in pursuance of which he had come thither. Besides which, the ardent kisses that Curzon lavished upon her, speedily renewed those sensuous feelings which she herself been irritating by her imagination and fostering by her fancy: and thus was it that in a very few moments the Earl became the object of all those desires with which the image of the Baronet had inspired her!

* * * * * * *

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Curzon stole forth from Venetia's boudoir and crept back to the chamber which had been allotted to himself. To say that he was happy were to say nothing: his countenance was radiant with triumph! Pecuniary embarrassments—troubles for the present—anxieties for the future—and the dark suspicion that still rankled in his mind relative to his own wife,—all, all, were forgotten—all utterly lost sight of—all absorbed as it were in the one grand ecstatic reflection that Venetia—the incomparable Venetia—had abandoned herself to his arms.

But how strange—how passing strange was this consummation—this sort of realization of the pledge which he had made two months back when he stood in her presence at Acacia Cottage! He had then said, "I have sworn to possess you, and I will keep my vow. Be you guarded by all the angels of heaven, I will invoke all the devils of hell to succour me in carrying out my resolve!" But without violence—without craft—without the succour of any of those infernal powers which he had threatened to enlist in his service, he had obtained the object of his wishes. It was scarcely a triumph: no—it was *not* a triumph, because there was no preliminary resistance offered. He had been invited to take possession of the citadel at a moment when he had not been dreaming of making warfare against it; and it had surrendered not merely at discretion, but willingly, cheerfully, joyfully!

Such were the Earl's thoughts on regaining the chamber which had been assigned to him. But perhaps his vanity would have been somewhat shocked, although his sensuous satisfaction might not have been less, had some little bird whispered in his ear the secret that it was purely and simply through a *mistake* he had been blessed with Venetia's love that night!

Immediately after the Earl of Curzon had stolen forth from the boudoir, Lady Sackville rose from the couch of illicit pleasure and rang the bell. Jessica speedily made her appearance; and the business of the toilette then commenced. Still bent upon retaining that empire which she had already gained, over the mind of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, Venetia took considerable pains with herself in order to set off her charms to the greatest advantage. She ordered Jessica to allow her hair to fall in long flowing masses over her shoulders and down her back;—and she chose a dress which, fitting close to her shape, developed its noble contours in their luxuriant fulness and their rounded plumpness. Nor did Jessica, who loved her mistress and was proud of her,—more than ever proud of her, indeed, since she had become a peeress and also the *favourite* of the Prince Regent,—Jessica, we say, did not fail to lavish her usual praises, encomia, and compliments upon Venetia's charms.

"Assuredly your ladyship has the finest hair I ever saw," observed the abigail. "Here it is a shining mass of gold where the light falls upon it —there it is of a glossy velvet darkness where the shade remains. If your ladyship were a queen, this glorious hair would render a crown needless. And your ladyship's neck—it is of dazzling whiteness—arching so gracefully too. Permit me to arrange the body of your ladyship's dress. There! now it exhibits the fine slope of the shoulders: how ravishing a picture to the eyes of a male admirer! Pardon me, my lady, for venturing the observation—but your bust is the grandest—the finest—the most superb that ever woman possessed. There is but one lady I ever saw who can at all compare with your ladyship in this respect ——"

"And who is that?" asked Venetia, with a smile

of ill-subdued satisfaction at her abigail's compliments.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," responded Jessica. "But though her bust is certainly very fine, it is not equal to your ladyship's. And now, if your ladyship would permit me to suggest that a fan has become an elegant appendage to even a morning costume ——"

"To be sure!—a fashion just imported from France," observed Venetia, as she negligently took the fan which Jessica presented to her.

But we will not linger upon this portion of our narrative. Suffice it to say that it was eleven o'clock by the time Lady Sackville had finished her toilette and partaken of breakfast: and punctually as her watch indicated that hour, was Sir Douglas Huntingdon ushered up into the boudoir.

Now be it understood that Venetia was guilty of no indiscretion, according to the notions then prevalent in the fashionable world, in thus receiving a male visitor in her private apartment. It was then a common custom, borrowed from the French; and therefore Lady Sackville did not compromise herself before her servants by thus granting an audience to the Baronet in that boudoir.

Receiving him with the most winning and enchanting affability, she seated herself near the toilette-table and pointed to a chair close by, which he immediately took.

"I am punctual to the appointment with which you have honoured—may I not rather say *favoured* me!" he observed, gazing tenderly upon her: and this remark was a further proof, if any additional one were wanting, that she had made a mistake in delivering the notes on the preceding evening.

"My dear Douglas," she said, for the first time addressing him thus familiarly, by his Christian name,—"there is nothing you can ask of me which I will not grant, provided you consent to do me that great and essential service to which I alluded last night."

"Have I not declared that you may command me even unto the very death?" exclaimed the Baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips.

"Yes—yes: and I believe you," she murmured: then suddenly assuming a serious look, and speaking in a solemn tone, she said, "My dear Douglas, I am about to confide to you a secret which will prove how thoroughly I trust in your honour—how completely I throw myself upon your goodness—and how implicitly I confide in your discretion. But the world says you are giddy—dissipated—reckless ——"

"By heaven! Venetia," exclaimed the Baronet, whose countenance had been rapidly lighting up with the most enthusiastic joy while the lady was speaking,—"think you that I am capable of allowing any act of madness or deed of folly on my part to entail injury upon you? No—by the living God! I could forswear wine—pleasure—recreation—aye, even the most innocent amusement, if I read disapproval in a word or look of thine! Besides, a man must be the basest of the base and the vilest of the vile, who would not do anything—even to the making of the largest sacrifices—in order to merit the confidence of such a being as thou art!"

"Thank you—Oh! thank you, Douglas, for these assurances," said Venetia, in that delicious voice which sank low, deep, and melodious into the very depths of the soul. "And now learn that where I give my confidence I also bestow my love: and this love, then, as well as that confidence I accord unto thee!"

"Oh! it is for me—it is for me to express my thanks—my illimitable gratitude, dearest, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, again seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips: then as she bent towards him, her very look and attitude encouraged him to venture farther still; and snatching her in his arms, he covered her lips—her cheeks—and her forehead with kisses.

Gently disengaging herself from his embrace after lingering in it a few moments—sufficiently long indeed to convince him that she resented not this liberty which he had taken, and that he might hope in due time for the crowning favours of her love—Venetia said, "I will now impart to thee that great secret which I have promised to reveal:"—then, after a brief pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she said, "Go and unlock the ebon cabinet behind that screen; and bring me forth the jewel-case which you will find therein."

Thus speaking, she placed a key in the Baronet's hand; and he at once proceeded to execute her instructions. The lock being low down in the door of the cabinet, he had to stoop even to his knees in order to introduce the key, the screen rendering that nook of the boudoir comparatively dark. But at the very moment that he was thus kneeling down behind the screen, the door of the boudoir was gently opened and the Earl of Curzon made his appearance.

He had performed all the details of his toilette save with respect to putting on his coat,—instead of which he wore an elegant dressing-gown that had been placed in his chamber for his use. Now, had he entered the boudoir properly dressed, there would not have been any impropriety, or cause of suspicion in his visit: but the fact of thus introducing himself in a dressing-gown was naturally indicative of a more than ordinary familiarity existing between himself and Venetia.

Such was the thought that instantaneously flashed to her mind as he made his appearance; and she at once, with admirable self-possession, threw her arm over the screen with what to Curzon seemed a mere negligent and unpremeditated gesture, but with a wave of her hand which to Huntingdon behind that screen was a significant intimation that he must remain concealed there. Keeping therefore in his kneeling attitude, so as to continue unseen, the Baronet gently and noiselessly kissed the tips of the fingers that thus hung over that barrier which concealed him;—and this little tender proceeding on his part was meant to convey to Venetia not only an assurance that her hint was understood, but that it should also be obeyed.

At the same moment—for indeed all these little details in the embarrassing episode were the work of only an instant—the Earl of Curzon hastened to throw himself at the feet of Venetia, to whom he was about to pour forth his gratitude for the hours of love he had passed in her arms: but she suddenly checked the flood of language ere even a syllable had time to escape his lips—for, tapping him good-naturedly with her fan, and bending upon him an arch look, she said, "I know you have come to bid me *good morning*,' before you take your departure homeward; and you are now kneeling at my feet in mock humility——"

"On my honour!" ejaculated the Earl, somewhat surprised at a tone and manner which were rather roguishly jocular than tender and loving as he had expected.

"Not a word, my lord!" she again interrupted him: and with a rapid gesture she pointed towards the door, accompanying the movement with a look suddenly and earnestly significant, as if to warn him that danger was nigh and that he was compromising her. "Yes—I know," she continued, still in that jocular tone which she had previously assumed, "that you are kneeling here to beg pardon for having partaken too generously of my husband's punch. But as I am every moment expecting a visit—from his Royal Highness ——"

The Earl started to his feet: and without uttering a word, he pressed Venetia's hand tenderly—darted upon her a look of mingled tenderness and deep meaning—and then hurried from the room.

An immense weight was now suddenly lifted from Venetia's mind; and she breathed freely once more. Her object was gained—her purpose was won: she had not only prevented the Earl from addressing her in a manner which would betray their amour, but she had likewise kept Huntingdon behind the screen so that he did not observe that Curzon had on the dressing-gown.

"Now you can come forth again, my dear Douglas," she said, starting from her seat and looking gaily and roguishly at him over the screen as he rose to his feet. "To tell you the truth," she continued, "as you were behind the screen at the moment the door opened I thought it best for you to remain there: hence the sudden sign which I made you to keep concealed: for had you come forth as the Earl entered the room, he might have fancied that it was a lover startled from his hiding-place ——"

"And am I not a lover?" asked Sir Douglas Huntingdon tenderly, as he embraced Venetia over the screen: for she gave him those explanations with an air of such artless candour that he did not for an instant suspect her sincerity;—and indeed as he had not observed that the Earl was clad in a dressing gown, he of course saw nothing more in his visit than the interpretation which Venetia had so artfully put upon it at the time—namely, that he had come to bid her "good morning" and apologise with good-humoured gallantry for having committed such a solecism in good manners as to drink too much punch.

"Yes, you are indeed my lover—and a beloved one also," said Venetia, in reply to the Baronet's question. "And now come forth from behind that screen, and bring me the jewel-case."

The Baronet did as he was desired; and Venetia, opening the jewel-box, drew forth the packet of letters tied round with the white riband, and over which we have seen her weeping so bitterly. Unfastening the riband, she selected two or three of the letters and requested Sir Douglas Huntingdon to glance his eye over their contents. He did so:—a quarter of an hour or perhaps twenty minutes were thus absorbed; and while he was perusing those letters, Venetia sate pensive and mournful, watching his countenance.

"Now that you have read those letters," she said, when Sir Douglas laid down the last one which she had given him to peruse, "you have acquired some insight into the character of a being in whose behalf I am about to enlist your services."

Having thus spoken, Venetia took the letters and locked them up in her jewel-box again: then, after a long pause, during which all her thoughts appeared to be held in deep abstraction, she began to address Sir Douglas Huntingdon in a low and solemn tone of confidence.

But what she then said to him—the revelations which she made and the service which she exacted—must remain at present a mystery to our readers: and therefore do we at once drop the curtain upon the scene.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE LAMB AMONGST THE WOLVES-IN-SHEEP'S-CLOTHING.

Turn we now to one of the many handsome apartments of Leveson House: and there we shall find the beautiful Louisa Stanley seated in company with Lady Ernestina Dysart.

Her ladyship was clad in the weeds of widowhood,—the sable garb becoming her admirably, and setting off the whiteness of her polished skin with dazzling effect. She even wore the widow's cap with a certain air of coquettishness—not suffering it to conceal altogether her light brown hair, which now instead of showering in tresses over her shoulders, was arranged in simple bands.

In sweet and innocent contrast with Ernestina, sate the charming and beautiful Louisa Stanley. When describing her in an earlier chapter, we said that her cheeks were not exactly of a rose-colour, but of an animated white, so that without being absolutely pale, they were of the delicate bloom which deepens only through emotion or exercise into the vermeil of the peach. Such was Louisa's complexion *then*—at the time of her first introduction to the reader: but *now*—alas! *now*, it was really and truly pale, the hand of grief having even effaced the health-tint of her youthful bloom! Indeed, it was only necessary to look for a moment into the depths of her blue eyes, to perceive that the remorseless iron of care had penetrated deep, deep into her soul: but in the pensiveness of her mien and the fixity of her desponding gaze, it was also easy to observe that a true Christian fortitude so far attempered and restrained her grief as to prevent it from bursting forth into frenzy or settling down into a blank despair.

It was about mid-day when we find Lady Ernestina Dysart and Louisa Stanley thus seated together in one of the elegantly-furnished drawing-rooms of Leveson House. The damsel had arrived there, in company with the Marquis, on the preceding evening; and she instantaneously became the object of so much kind attention and sisterly regard on the part of Ernestina, that she had already conceived a profound affection for her ladyship. To one of her artless simplicity and unsuspecting character, such a sudden fancy was natural enough; and as she had previously heard from Lord Leveson how his niece Ernestina had very lately lost in so shocking a manner a husband *to whom she was devotedly attached*, Louisa's sympathy was already excited towards the *afflicted* lady before they even met. Indeed, the touching

and pathetic tale which the Marquis had told Louisa upon that subject, was so artfully conceived as to appeal to all the tenderest feelings of the maiden, and thus predisposed her naturally affectionate disposition to entertain a deep liking for Lady Ernestina.

Thus was it that though Louisa Stanley had only been a few hours beneath the same roof with Lord Leveson's niece, the latter had already obtained a strong hold upon the unsuspecting girl and had insinuated herself entirely into her confidence. Therefore, as they now sate together, Ernestina was bending the kindest looks upon Louisa and conversing with her in the softest and tenderest tones—while the maiden felt as if the music of that voice, so full of angelic commiseration and soothing gentleness, flowed like an anodyne into the recesses of her wounded heart.

"My dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina, "you are doubtless most anxious for the return of my uncle——"

"Ah! dear lady," cried Louisa, "can you not understand that I long to fold a beloved sister in my arms—a sister from whom I have been separated for so many months!"

"But I fear that there must be some mistake relative to your sister's address," observed the patrician lady. "However, we shall see in a few minutes: my uncle has been gone nearly an hour—and we may therefore expect his return every moment. Indeed, I wonder what keeps him so long."

"Is Stratton Street far from hence?" inquired Louisa.

"Far!" ejaculated Lady Ernestina. "Oh! no—it is not five minutes' walk; but I had forgotten that this is the first time you ever visited London. When you were giving me that rapid outline of your history this morning, you mentioned the name of Beckford, and observed that your sister was staying with a lady and gentleman of that name——"

"Yes: it is not long that they have removed into Stratton Street," returned Louisa: "they used to live at No. 20, Hanover Square."

"No. 20, Hanover Square!" ejaculated Ernestina, stricken with surprise, and even startled by the mention of an address which instantly conjured up fearful and mysterious associations in her mind: "that is the abode of the Malverns!"

"But have you not in London many streets bearing the same name?" inquired Louisa.

"Yes—to be sure: and there may be several Stratton Streets—but certainly only one at the West End of the town. There may also be another Hanover Square, for anything that I know: but there is assuredly only one of that name in the region of fashion. However, there is no doubt but the Marquis will find out your sister, whatever Stratton Street she may be residing in."

Louisa's lovely countenance brightened up at these words; and with a look did she thank Lady Ernestina for the assurance. A brief pause then ensued in the conversation: for Louisa began to wonder within herself whether Clara would chide her for having so long abandoned their afflicted aunt to the care of a comparative stranger, and for hurrying in the first place to Paris relative to her lover, and now coming up to London expressly to behold and embrace a sister.

On the other hand Lady Ernestina was just thinking how she should enter upon a certain task which her delectable uncle had set her. For every barrier of delicate feeling and pure sentiment was so far broken down between the uncle and niece, that they no longer sought to practise towards each other any concealment of disposition or principles. On the one hand the Marquis knew that his niece had been a very profligate and abandoned demirep, first with a lover of her own choice—then with the Prince into whose arms she was forced: he had seen her so far forget herself as to visit a house of ill-fame in the expectation of meeting a wealthy admirer;—he knew likewise that she had actually been the means of consigning her husband to the scaffold, whereas she might have saved him had she chosen!

On the other hand, Lady Ernestina had experienced positive proof that her uncle employed a procuress—the infamous Mrs. Gale—to entice young females to her house in order to appease his brutal lusts. Moreover, during his absence in Paris, and since the adventure with the Hangman in the treacherous chair, she had penetrated into the gallery of paintings and sculptures, and had thus obtained a deeper—aye, the deepest insight into the hideous sensuality of her uncle's character. Consequently, knowing all these things of each other—and mutually aware too that all these things *were* thus known—it would have been the most absurd of mockeries to maintain any longer the semblance of delicate feeling, propriety, or virtue; and therefore it seemed as if the Marquis, the moment he returned from Paris, was fully prepared to throw off the mask altogether. Such indeed was his intention; and such was the interpretation that Ernestina put upon his conduct, when he whispered the following words in her ear after Louisa had been conducted to her chamber:—"I need not tell you wherefore I have brought this girl hither. She is innocent as a lamb, and artless as a child: it is for you to initiate her in the mysteries of life, so that when I choose to address her in the language of passion, she may not colour with shame, but with desire."

Thus had the Marquis spoken to his niece on the preceding evening, after having consigned Louisa to her care, and just before he went to pay that visit to the Prince at Carlton House which has been mentioned in a preceding chapter. It was a hideous thing for an uncle thus to address a niece—a still more hideous thing that a niece should consent to obey such instructions on the part of an uncle. And it may seem the more dreadful, too, inasmuch as not many weeks had elapsed since that uncle and that niece were sitting shamefaced and weeping in the presence of each other, at the mutual discoveries of frailty and demoralization which were then made. But the instant the mask thus fell from their countenances the barrier of delicacy was speedily annihilated between them;—and moreover, be it observed that in the aristocratic mind the rank weeds of vice and crime spring up, when once they have germinated, with an astonishing rapidity, and speedily bloom in all their poisoned luxuriance in the heated atmosphere of fashionable life.

The brief pause which followed the observations relative to Stratton Street, Hanover Square, and Louisa's sister, was interrupted by Lady Ernestina Dysart observing, "My dear girl, I cannot suffer you to look thus dull and miserable."

"Ah! dear lady," said Louisa, with a profound sigh, "I have so much to render me unhappy!"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing," returned Lady Ernestina, "but the loss of a young man who appears to be utterly unworthy of the love you bestowed upon him."

"Oh! treat not the circumstance so lightly!" exclaimed Louisa, both shocked and amazed at the remark: for all Ernestina's previous allusions to the subject had been expressive of a tender condolence and delicate sympathy.

"Dearest Louisa," cried the artful patrician, "not for a moment did I mean to vex or startle you: but I was merely about to introduce a truth which you yourself will recognise sooner or later—namely, that the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus is not the only handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman in the world."

"O Lady Ernestina! if a stranger had made that observation to me," exclaimed Louisa, now more painfully surprised and deeply shocked than at first, "I should have regarded it either as an insult or else as a sign of unfeeling thoughtlessness!"

"I am addressing you, my dear young friend," said Ernestina, "as a woman of the world should address a young and inexperienced girl."

"Ah! lady," said Louisa, with a look of angelic frankness,—"never, never shall I obey the dictates of any influence save the natural impulses of my own heart. I have loved Jocelyn tenderly and well: and, Oh! despite his deep, deep criminality, I love him—yes, love him as tenderly and devotedly still! But there is within me, lady, a feeling superior even to that fond and now hopeless love of mine; and this feeling is a sense of duty which tells me that henceforth Jocelyn must ever remain a stranger to me in the world, no matter how fondly his image may be cherished in my heart!"

"This is the way young maidens always talk when disappointed in their first love," said Ernestina, watching Louisa's countenance attentively to see how she took the remark, and whether it would be prudent to venture any farther at present: then perceiving that the damsel became thoughtful, as if weighing the matter seriously in her mind, Ernestina continued to observe, "If you were to remain long with us in London you would soon perceive that what you call *love* performs but a very secondary part in genteel marriages. I will give you an example. It is not two months since the beauty of the fashionable world, Venetia Trelawney, married a very handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman, named Horace Sackville. Their honeymoon was short indeed; and at its expiration they were suddenly created Lord and Lady Sackville. But that was not all. His lordship was at the same time nominated to a high official situation in the household of the Prince Regent: and accordingly, the newly-married couple gave up their beautiful villa at Knightsbridge and took possession of a suite of apartments in Carlton House. Now Carlton House, my dear Louisa, is the Prince Regent's Palace; and perhaps you may have heard that the Prince Regent himself is a very naughty wicked man, and much too fond of the ladies. But, in plain terms, the reason why Lord and Lady Sackville thus took up their abode at Carlton House, was in order that her ladyship might be under the same roof with the Prince whose *favourite* she has become. Thus, you see, although it is most probable that Lord and Lady Sackville married in the first instance for what is called *love*, they hesitated not to make the sacrifice of that feeling when titles, pensions, and places were offered them. As a matter of course, then, this Venetia of whom I am speaking to you, is the mistress of the Prince——"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed Louisa, the colour mounting to her cheeks as her pure soul revolted from the narrative the main point of which had only just that instant flashed to her comprehension. "Oh! if such detestable creatures as this Venetia constitute the charm, the glory, and the worship of your *fashionable world of London*, how little do I envy the rich and the great ones of this metropolis! Better, better far is my own humble cottage situated in a retired suburb of Canterbury!—and more welcome to me would prove a chaplet of the roses that bloom in summer over that cottage portico, than the most brilliant coronet glittering upon the brow of your titled lady of the metropolis!"

Ernestina was about to respond to these observations, when the door opened and the Marquis of Leveson entered the room.

"What tidings, my lord?" exclaimed Louisa, springing from her seat and bounding towards him with the most eager curiosity.

"Patience, patience, young lady," answered the nobleman, assuming a playful manner. "Your sister Clara does indeed reside at the address you mentioned in Stratton Street, and also with those worthy people, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, whom you named."

As the Marquis thus spoke, Lady Ernestina contemplated him with the profoundest astonishment, which was not however observed by Louisa, who was gazing intently upon the nobleman, but with her suspense now relieved by a gradually expanding gleam of pleasure.

"Yes," continued the Marquis, in a tone which seemed candid and frank enough to Louisa, but which nevertheless now satisfied Ernestina that he was practising some artifice upon the maiden,—"yes, my dear girl," he continued, "I am delighted to have ascertained for your sake that there really is no error in your sister's address; but I am sorry to inform you that she is out of town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford for a few days—possibly a week."

"Oh! how unfortunate I am," ejaculated Louisa, a sudden cloud lowering upon her lovely countenance, and the tears starting forth upon her long lashes. "But are they gone far from London?—can I not hasten after them? Oh! I feel convinced that my sister will be so rejoiced to see me——"

"Unfortunately," said the Marquis, "the servants in Stratton Street are not aware whither their master and mistress, together with Miss Stanley, are gone. It is however certain that they will all return home again in a week or ten days——"

"Oh! did I not say that I was unfortunate?" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands together and now bursting forth into a flood of tears. "I dare not—must not remain away from Canterbury: I have already deserted my poor afflicted aunt too long! The thought of thus abandoning her fills me with remorse; and therefore I must hasten back home, and postpone the hope of an interview with my sister until some more auspicious occasion."

"You have already admitted, my dear young lady," said the Marquis of Leveson, "that I have

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given you the best possible advice ever since you placed yourself under my paternal guardianship. Now, I beg of you to do nothing precipitately. You know that your aunt is kindly treated by the young lady whom you have left to take care of her; and therefore you would do well to remain here in London until the return of your sister, who, depend upon it would never forgive you if you did not follow my advice in this respect. My house shall be your home; and you know that in me you possess a sincere well-wisher, although our acquaintance has been so short, and although you had likewise heard statements from the lips of Miss Mary Owen prejudicial to my true character."

Artless, unsuspicious, and confiding though the young damsel naturally was, yet there was something in this speech which displeased her. She knew not what it was that thus seemed to grate upon some mysterious chord in her heart—nor could she have pointed out which particular sentence or phrase it was that excited a feeling of uneasiness within her. But certain it was that alarming suspicions suddenly took possession of her mind; and the moment the Marquis endeavoured to impress upon her the conviction of his sincerity, some secret voice appeared to whisper from the depths of her soul that he was deceiving her. The *how* or the *wherefore* did not strike her—nor did she pause to conjecture: for now that the train of her suspicions was once fired, it blazed up with astonishing speed. Back, back to her remembrance came vividly and forcibly a thousand little things which Mary Owen had let drop relative to the Marquis of Leveson: she bethought herself also of a certain peculiar expression which she had frequently noticed in the regards that he fixed upon her when they were in Paris or travelling together; and to her memory returned the singular discourse in which Lady Ernestina Dysart had indulged just previously to her uncle's entrance.

"My lord," she said, endeavouring to veil her fears and therefore her suspicions as well as she was able, "I thank your lordship for all the kindnesses I have experienced at your hand: I thank her ladyship also for the generous sympathy I have received from her during the few hours I have been beneath this roof. But you must not deem me ungrateful for so much hospitality, if I declare at once that I am determined to leave London without delay for Canterbury——"

"Louisa, my dear girl!" exclaimed the Marquis, evidently astounded and almost dismayed by this resolve so decisively expressed,—and, at the same time, there was in his look something so sinister that, unsophisticated as Louisa was, she at once read therein the confirmation of her suspicions: "you cannot think—you must not entertain—no—really," stammered the nobleman,—"I will not permit——"

"My lord, I am determined to hasten home without delay," interrupted Louisa, her courage rising in proportion as her position seemed to become more menacing and dangerous. "It is not yet an hour past noon: perhaps your lordship will allow one of your domestics to order a post-chaise to be in immediate attendance for me?"

"The haste—the precipitation, with which you are thus about to depart, my dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina Dysart, rising from her seat and taking Louisa's hand, "would almost amount to an impeachment upon our hospitality—or indeed a mistrust of our friendship towards you."

"Pray do not deem me ungrateful, nor thus prejudge my motives," said Louisa, with a tell-tale blush upon her cheeks which showed that her thoughts were in reality precisely as Ernestina had interpreted them. "Accept all my thanks—and if you would add to the obligations which you have imposed upon me, then suffer me to depart at once."

And having thus spoken, Louisa hastened to the bell-pull and rang it somewhat violently.

At the same instant the Marquis and his niece exchanged rapid glances, expressive of the conviction that it was useless to try farther argument or persuasion: and then the significant look which the nobleman assumed, made Ernestina aware that his lordship had determined upon strong and coercive measures.

A footman promptly answered Louisa's summons; and in a tone of complete confidence, she said, "Will you be so kind as to order a post-chaise to be immediately procured."

The domestic bowed a respectful assent: but as he raised his eyes again, at the moment of turning to quit the room, he saw Lord Leveson shake his head at him, unperceived however by Louisa,—and the footman accordingly understood that he was *not* to order the post-chaise.

"With your permission," said Louisa to Lady Ernestina, the moment the servant had retired, "I will now ascend to my chamber and prepare for departure."

"I will join you there in a few moments, Louisa," was the reply, "to see whether I can be of service to you, since you are determined to quit us."

Louisa Stanley then left the room; and the moment the door closed behind her, the Marquis addressed himself in hurried and excited terms to his niece.

"Ernestina," he said, "you explained to me this morning how, during my absence in France, a ruffian introduced himself into this house—and how he concealed himself in my secret suite of apartments. You likewise confessed to me how you and the Prince proceeded thither, and how you found that burglarious villain held captive in one of my mechanical chairs. You farther told me how this man turned out to be the public executioner—and how the Prince, with a heavy bribe, ensured his services to buoy up Dysart till the very last moment with the hope of a reprieve."

"But wherefore, in the name of heaven! recapitulate all these details?" exclaimed Ernestina, surveying her uncle with astonishment.

"Because," he responded, in a hoarse thick voice, as if the profound concentration of a burning passion was impelling him into extremes at which he trembled and was afraid, and forcing him to hold a language to his own niece at which he was both ashamed and shocked,—"because," he said, "since you have chosen to enter those rooms for your own pleasure, you may now revisit them for mine: and because, since you found seated in one of those chairs a man who afterwards helped to rid you of a detested husband, you may now inveigle into that same chair this young girl on whom I have set my heart."

"But, good heavens!" cried Ernestina, "she is too pure—too innocent!—and this outrage cannot be perpetrated with impunity."

"Do not reason with me," cried her uncle, impetuously. "You see that she is escaping from my toils—she is bent upon leaving us—she evidently suspects something—and it is only by clipping the angel-wings of her innocence that we can prevent this startled dove from flying away!"

"Well, be it as you will," said Ernestina. "You doubtless foresee all the consequences—and I will do as you command. But tell me—one word—what is all this mystery about her sister, these unknown Beckfords, and Stratton Street?"

"Oh! such a mystery indeed—such a secret as I have learnt this day!" exclaimed the Marquis. "But I cannot explain myself now: on another occasion I will tell you all—everything—and then you will indeed be as much astonished as I was. But now hasten and do as I have bid you. Here is the key of the door opening from the Crimson Drawing Room."

Ernestina darted a look of intelligence upon her uncle as she took the key,—a look which told him as plainly as possible that all which depended on herself should be done to facilitate his designs. Then, quitting the apartment where this colloquy had taken place, she repaired first to the Crimson Drawing Room to unlock the door leading into the secret chambers, and then hurried up-stairs to Louisa's room.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE WOLVES THROWING OFF THEIR DISGUISE.

In the meantime Louisa had sought the chamber where she had passed the preceding night; and she immediately began to pack up her trunk for departure. Not for an instant did she suspect that the Marquis of Leveson had dared negative

her orders to fetch the post-chaise: but still she felt that she should breathe more freely when beyond the threshold of this grand aristocratic mansion, the very atmosphere as which seemed heavy, oppressive, and ominous of the dead lull and stifling closeness which pervades the outburst of the storm.

Scarcely had she finished packing her trunk when Lady Ernestina Dysart entered the chamber.

"My dear Louisa," said the artful woman, assuming a look of such well-feigned sorrow that the maiden was completely thrown off her guard thereby, and began to fancy that she had wronged even the Marquis himself by her suspicions,—"my dear Louisa," repeated her ladyship, in the most soothing, endearing, and sympathetic tone, "I am truly vexed that you purpose to leave us thus suddenly: but my uncle desires me to say that he will watch for your sister's return home in company with her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, and he will let you know through me when you can come back to London with the certainty of meeting her."

"I am truly grateful," said our heroine, "for this proof of kind consideration on the part of his lordship and yourself:"—but still Louisa spoke with a certain degree of restraint, for she could not give facile utterance to words that came not wholly from her heart.

"Oh! do not thank me for anything which I may do for you," exclaimed Ernestina: "it is a real pleasure to serve so sweet a girl as yourself. And now, my dear Louisa, as it will be a quarter of an hour at least before the post-chaise is ready, I have ordered refreshments to be served up in my own chamber: and thither must you accompany me, so that we may have a few minutes' *tête-à-tête* before you leave."

This proposal was made with so much friendly candour and winning affability, that Louisa did not hesitate to accept it. Lady Ernestina accordingly led the way first into the Crimson Drawing Room, and thence into the adjoining apartment, the elegance of which naturally excited Louisa's admiration, notwithstanding the claims which other and far more serious matters had upon her thoughts. But her patrician guide did not allow her much leisure to contemplate this room, with its luxurious sofas ranged all round the walls, its splendid porcelain vases exhaling delicious perfumes, and its exquisitely chased silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Opening the door at the farther extremity, Ernestina conducted the maiden into the next room, where, as the reader will remember, the carpet was the thickest ever trodden upon, and where the arm-chairs were the most massive ever seen,—provided too with cushions of corresponding proportions.

"This is the ante-room to my own chamber," said the false-speaking and evil-intentioned Ernestina; "and I ordered the refreshments to be served up here. I suppose the footman must have misunderstood me," she continued, assuming a tone of vexation. "Sit down, my dear girl," she added, affably pointing to a chair: "and I will ring the bell for luncheon."

Louisa unhesitatingly proceeded to place herself where the treacherous lady thus pointed: but scarcely had the young virgin's form made its imprint upon the flocculent cushion, when the sudden click of the secret mechanism was heard, and she found herself strangely but alarmingly held captive by means of the springs that clasped her wrists and the steel bands that fastened their gripe upon her shoulders.

The terror of consternation for a few moments sealed her lips: but as she beheld Lady Ernestina suddenly disappear through a door which opened in the wall exactly facing the treacherous chair, the unfortunate girl saw indeed too well that she was betrayed, and a piercing scream burst from her lips. But almost immediately after Ernestina had flitted away so abruptly, and while that rending scream was still vibrating through the suite of rooms, the Marquis of Leveson stood before his intended victim!

He had entered by that same door through which his niece had fled; and closing it behind him, he at once said, in a low but earnest tone, "Louisa, your cries are unavailing: no mortal ear do they reach beyond the four walls of this room;—and therefore I need scarcely observe that you are in my power!"

"My lord, my lord," faltered the maiden, in a dying tone, while her brain grew dizzy and a film came over her eyes "take pity upon the friendless orphan who never injured you!"

"O Louisa!" exclaimed the Marquis, fixing upon her those satyr eyes that were burning with desire—"to ask mercy for yourself is to tell *me* to make an impossible sacrifice! Listen to me, dear girl—do not despair—do not give way to grief—do not look thus wildly, thus vaguely upon me! You know that I bear one of the loftiest and proudest titles in England—that my riches are immense: you have seen enough of this mansion here to know that it is spacious and magnificent;—and I may add that in the loveliest spots of England there are country-seats—perfect paradises in themselves—of which I am also the possessor. Of this lofty title, then will I make thee the sharer—of this wealth will I make thee the mistress: my mansions, my domains, my rural villas—all shall be thine, Louisa, if thou wilt give me thy love!"

Our heroine heard the tones of the nobleman's voice, but comprehended not what he said. There was a hurry in her brain that made her thoughts a whirlwind and threw her senses into confusion. All she knew was that some tremendous danger menaced her, and that she was sinking beneath the weight of an ineffable consternation.

The Marquis saw that she was thus overwhelmed—that her head was drooping—and that her senses were slowly abandoning her; and he thought within himself, "I will not excite nor arouse her—I will let her sink into insensibility—and then——"

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The instant Lady Ernestina Dysart had performed her treacherous part towards poor Louisa Stanley, she disappeared from the presence of the outraged maiden in the manner already described. The reader will have comprehended that she touched the secret spring and opened the invisible door communicating with her uncle's room, where indeed his lordship had been awaiting the issue of the adventure.

Hastily telling him that the deed was done, Ernestina traversed the bed-chamber and hurried into the Crimson Drawing Room, where she threw herself upon a sofa, palpitating with excitement. For bad, depraved, and unprincipled though she was, she nevertheless felt shocked and frightened

in the presence of this tremendous iniquity to which she had lent herself.

Not many moments, however, did she thus give way to her painful reflections, ere she was startled by the entrance of a footman, saying, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon requests an immediate interview with either my Lord Marquis or your ladyship."

Ernestina was about to desire the domestic to say that neither she nor her uncle was at home, when the Baronet, who had followed close behind the footman, now walked unceremoniously into the room.

The lacquey accordingly retired: and this singular behaviour on the part of Huntingdon so increased, or indeed so completely crowned Ernestina's agitation that, all woman of the world though she was, she felt covered with confusion.

"Pardon this intrusion, my lady," said Huntingdon, who spoke in the tone and with the air of a man bent upon the performance of some decisive part: "but I must see the Marquis immediately."

"My uncle is particularly engaged," faltered Lady Ernestina, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks and running up even unto her forehead, so that it was lost beneath the massive bands of her light brown hair.

"If I cannot see the Marquis, then," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately, "your ladyship will perhaps have the kindness to afford me an interview with Miss Louisa Stanley, who is now staying at Leveson House."

Ernestina gave a visible start as this demand smote her ears: and with the instinctive impulse of a guilty conscience, she cast her eyes rapidly towards the door communicating with the private suite of apartments.

Sir Douglas, who was keenly alive to every look or gesture on the part of the lady, and who saw in her increasing confusion something calculated to excite the most alarming suspicions, failed not to observe that glance which she involuntarily flung towards the door. He was no stranger to the existence of that suite of apartments: as one of the most intimate friends of Lord Leveson, all the treacherous or licentious mysteries thereof were well known to him;—and it was therefore natural that he should now suddenly argue the very worst. He had been told that Leveson was particularly engaged—his visit had evidently overwhelmed Lady Ernestina with confusion and dismay—and that tell-tale look which she had flung at the door of the private chambers, at once seemed to afford a clue to all that was passing.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the Baronet: "my friend the Marquis is in those rooms—and as I am no stranger to the mysteries of his mansion, I will, with your ladyship's permission, at once seek him there."

As he thus spoke, Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened towards the door of the private apartments: but Lady Ernestina sprang after him and caught him by the arm, exclaiming, "No, sir—you must not intrude upon my uncle's privacy!"

"I am well aware, as a matter of course," said Huntingdon, "that my behaviour may seem somewhat extraordinary; but it will be your ladyship's fault if it now merge into downright rudeness."

"Rudeness! what do you mean, sir?" ejaculated Ernestina, a deeper crimson than before suffusing her face, and her eyes flashing angrily: "you surely, as a gentleman, are incapable of rudeness towards *me*, a lady?"

"Then, as a lady," cried the Baronet, in a stern and even imperious tone such as perhaps he had never used in his life before,—"conduct yourself like a lady, and depend upon it I should never dream of treating you otherwise."

"Again I demand of you, sir, what you mean by this insulting observation?" cried Ernestina, now labouring under a terrible excitement.

"I mean," responded the Baronet, with a significance of look and a determination of manner that made her quail and recoil in dismay,—"I mean that if you prevent me from entering those rooms, I shall suspect that you are acquainted with all the mysteries which they contain; and this will not be highly creditable to you! Moreover, if I discover that anything outrageous or vile is now passing in those rooms, I shall be justified in setting *you* down as the accessory and the accomplice."

Ernestina fell crushed and annihilated upon a chair, burying her face in her hands: for it appeared to her as if her whole heart was suddenly laid bare in its boundless depravity to the view of that man who addressed her in a tone of such haughty confidence, stern remonstrance, and terrible menace.

The Baronet, having thus silenced and subdued that lady whose complicity in her uncle's licentious proceedings was now too evident, lost no time in opening the door leading into the secret apartments, and which Ernestina had ere now left unlocked after conducting Louisa thither.

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Meantime the Marquis of Leveson, perceiving that Louisa Stanley was rapidly losing her consciousness, and that she was indeed fainting in that chair which so treacherously held her captive, stood for a few moments gloating upon the charms of which he hoped so soon to become the master. Her head hung down upon her bosom, of which his lustful eyes caught a slight glimpse; and the bands, clasping her shoulders, held her back in such a manner that though her charming head thus drooped like a flower on its tall slender stalk, yet her form was retained upright in the chair. Therefore his gaze could slowly wander over the graceful symmetry and virgin contours of that exquisite shape,—a shape that possessed all the light and airy elegance of the sylph, with just sufficient fulness to denote that the last stage of girlhood was bursting into the luxuriant bloom and ripeness of womanhood.

But just at the moment when the Marquis of Leveson fancied that our heroine was sinking into a profound insensibility, and while all his detestable passions were boiling up to a frenzied degree at what appeared to be the close consummation of his diabolical project,—just at the instant, in fact, that he believed himself to be touching on his crowning infamy,—Louisa appeared to be startled suddenly back to full consciousness.

Raising her head, she gazed for a moment—a single moment—wildly around her: then, all the tremendous truth flashing to her recollection and all the incidents of her position recurring vividly to her comprehension, she gave vent to another, loud, long, and piercing scream.

"Foolish girl! I have told thee that thy cries are vain," said the Marquis, going straight up to her and looking her full in the face. "Will you be mine, I say, voluntarily?—will you yield of your own accord, and accept my hand—my fortune—my title——"

But scream upon scream thrilled from the maiden's lips; and the Marquis, stamping his foot with rage, was bursting forth into violent threats—when suddenly the door between this and the first room of the suite was thrown violently open, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon sprang into the presence of the startled nobleman and his intended victim.

"Release this young lady immediately," exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the collar of the Marquis.

"What! *you*, Huntingdon, thus to interfere with the pursuits of an old friend?" faltered Leveson, not knowing what to think of the intrusion.

"Let us not bandy words," said the Baronet, sternly: "you see that I am resolute! Come—I understand not precisely the mechanism of this chair—but I command you to release Miss Louisa Stanley forthwith!"

The nobleman saw that Huntingdon was not only in earnest, but also fully bent upon the deliverance of the maiden: and accordingly, with a hand trembling as if suddenly palsied, the Marquis touched the spring which instantaneously released our heroine from her captivity.

Falling at the feet of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the enthusiasm of her joy at this sudden and providential liberation, Louisa took his hand and pressed it with all the fervour of her young heart's gratitude. The Baronet hastened to raise her; and fixing his eyes upon the Marquis, who stood by pale and trembling with rage, he said, "Nothing of all this shall be known if you permit Miss Louisa Stanley to depart from your house without any farther attempt at molestation. But if a finger be raised to impede her passage, I will adopt any measure—no matter how much calculated to expose you——"

"Retire then—go—depart," faltered the Marquis, with a strong effort to subdue the violence of his passion: "but I beseech—I implore Miss Louisa Stanley not to betray me—and above all things not to breathe a word to the ruin of my niece!"

Our heroine's heart was too full of joy at her happy deliverance to allow her tongue to utter a word: but Sir Douglas Huntingdon said emphatically, "I promise you, Leveson, on my honour as a gentleman, that nothing of all this shall be revealed elsewhere."

Having thus spoken, the Baronet hastily conducted Louisa Stanley into the Crimson Drawing Room,—closing behind them the doors through which they passed. Lady Ernestina was no longer there: she had retired in shame, terror, and grief, to her own apartment, leaving the perplexing and menacing adventure to take its own course.

"Miss Stanley," the Baronet now said, the moment they were together in the Crimson Drawing Room; "have the goodness to read this note."

The damsel instantaneously took the billet which was presented to her; and an ejaculation of joy fell from her lips as she recognised her sister's handwriting. Tearing open the note, she read the following words:—

"12, STRATTON STREET.
"*Nov.* 16*th*, 1814.

"The bearer of this, my ever dear Louisa, is a gentleman in whom you may confide. He will take you away from a place where you are surrounded by manifold dangers, and will bring you at once to me.

"Your affectionate sister,
"CLARA."

Words are incapable of describing the delight and happiness which now sprang up in Louisa's bosom, even to the absorption for the time being of her grief on account of her lover's presumed infidelity.

"Then my sister—my beloved sister—is indeed in town," she exclaimed; "and the Marquis deceived me!"

"No, Miss Stanley—he did not altogether deceive you," answered the Baronet: "for if he had not called in Stratton Street ere now, your sister could not of course have known that you were at Leveson House or even in London at all. But the truth is this—your sister was indeed absent from town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford; but she came back suddenly and alone, in order to execute some little commission for Mrs. Beckford. She arrived in Stratton Street only a few minutes after the Marquis had left. Knowing his evil reputation, she was shocked and horrified at the idea of her sister being beneath his roof; and as I happened to call at the moment, she besought me to come with this note which you have just read. My carriage is at the door; and so soon as you are ready, I shall have much pleasure in escorting you to Stratton Street."

Louisa hastened up-stairs for her bonnet and scarf, with which she speedily returned to the Crimson Drawing Room, well pleased at encountering neither the Marquis nor Lady Ernestina upon the stairs. Having rung the bell, she ordered the footman who answered the summons to have her trunk taken down to the Baronet's carriage, which was waiting at the door: and when, in a few minutes, the domestic announced that her commands had been executed, she accompanied Sir Douglas Huntingdon from Leveson House.

And now who can describe the feelings of this young, beautiful, and artless girl as she took her seat in the vehicle which was to convey her to that sister from whom she had been separated for five long months? Yet while rolling along in the handsome equipage, she did not forget to renew her thanks to Sir Douglas Huntingdon for the immense service which he had rendered her: but he assured the charming girl that he was only too happy in having arrived at Leveson House so seasonably as to rescue her from the peril in which the darkest and deepest treachery had placed her. Indeed, to tell the truth, as Sir Douglas Huntingdon contemplated with respectful admiration the lovely damsel by his side, he could not help thinking that there was even in the world a pleasure more genuine and more sweet than to triumph over innocence,—namely, to rescue it from impending ruin!

But neither the Baronet nor Louisa had many minutes for reflection or conversation, inasmuch as the carriage soon dashed up to the door of a handsome house in Stratton Street; and looking forth from the window of the vehicle, our heroine

beheld the countenance of her sister at one of the casements of the drawing-room.

In another minute Louisa was clasped—firmly, fondly clasped—in the embrace of that affectionate sister: and not only their kisses, but also their tears were mingled!

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE SISTERS.

The drawing-room where the sisters thus met, was very handsomely furnished, and bore all the evidences of a refined female taste. It was the same room where Jocelyn Loftus had seen Clara Stanley on the occasion of his visit to London, and where she had given her approval of his suit in respect to Louisa.

The sisters were now alone together;—for Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not followed our heroine up into that room, but remained in an apartment below. When the first effusion of joy was over, and the first transports of delight at this meeting were somewhat subsided, Clara and Louisa sate down side by side upon the sofa, and began to contemplate each other with the deepest, tenderest interest.

On the one hand, Clara beheld her younger sister beautiful as ever, and with all that ineffable sweetness of look and innocence of mien which indicated the stainless purity of her soul: she saw her, too, at great advantage—for the pallor and the pensiveness previously occasioned by Jocelyn's supposed perfidy, had now yielded to the roseate tinge of joy and the brightness of look which reflected the heart's holiest satisfaction. Clara therefore beheld her sister lovely and loveable as she was when they parted,—one of the chastest and most charming ornaments which the sex ever bestowed upon this world—an incarnation of all the sweetest, truest, and most ethereal attributes which piety or poesy ascribes unto angels!

On the other hand, Louisa beheld her sister more grandly beautiful, more superbly handsome than when they parted under the rose-covered portico of their Kentish cottage. She saw in Clara a magnificent woman the glory of whose charms seemed to have expanded into a finer and more dazzling bloom in the hot-house of London fashion. Nor less did it strike Louisa that everything at all girlish which might have lingered in the manners or looks of Clara some months back, had now totally departed. The finest gloss of courtly elegance seemed to rest upon her like a charm and hang about her like a spell: there was a grandeur in every movement—a brilliancy in every gesture, softened and subdued only by the polish of an exquisite refinement, and more so by the tenderness of feeling which she now experienced at this meeting with her sister. In a word, our fair young heroine, although she had ever been accustomed to look up to Clara as an elder sister, now regarded her with the deference that mingles in the affection which a daughter experiences for a mother. For Louisa still felt herself a mere girl; whereas Clara looked in every respect, not only the brilliant woman, but also the great lady. Thus Louisa, with her nineteen years and a half, felt as if she were a miss of fifteen or sixteen in the presence of this elder sister,—who, though only twenty-one and a half, possessed all the worldly demeanour as well as the luxuriance of charms which characterise the superb matron of at least five or six years older.

Such were the impressions respectively made by this meeting of the sisters; and when they had gazed long and with earnest fondness upon each other, Louisa suddenly exclaimed, "O Clara! are you angry with me for having abandoned my home—for having gone to Paris—and now for having come up to London?"

"Do not talk of anger, dearest girl," said Clara, "while our hearts are yet throbbing with all the first transports of joy at this meeting. Angry with you, dearest Louisa! No, no—it were impossible! Not for worlds would I bring a tear into your eyes or change into gloom those smiles which now gleam so sweetly upon your lips! Ah! dearest Louisa, it is as if I were thy mother instead of thy sister that I am now talking to thee: and it is with such a feeling that I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice unfeignedly, to be enabled to pour balm into thy wounded heart!"

"Oh! dearest Clara," interrupted Louisa, surveying her sister with mingled amazement and suspense,—"to what do you allude? Alas! you cannot as yet know my sorrows; because, when I sate down in Paris to commit them to paper and send you an account of all that had occurred, the pen dropped from my hands! Yes—vainly did I commence letter after letter: each fresh attempt only rendered my heart's-wounds more painful—it was like pouring molten lead upon the seared and lacerated flesh! Pardon me, therefore, dear sister, for having thus preserved a silence which may seem unkind—nay, even improper——"

"Enough—enough! dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, throwing her arms round her young sister's neck and drawing down that innocent head until it reposed upon her bosom: "from your lips I need no apology — no excuse, — especially as I am well acquainted with much that has occurred. And to keep you no longer in suspense, let me assure you that Jocelyn is innocent!"

"Innocent!" echoed Louisa, her own sweet lips thus repeating in ecstatic joy an assurance which other sweet lips had just breathed in tenderness: "innocent!" she repeated, raising her head suddenly from her sister's bosom, her looks beaming and glittering with mingled joy, hope, and suspense. "Oh! if this were true—if this were true!"—and she clasped her hands with a gesture expressive of ineffable emotions.

"It is as I assure you, my beloved sister," rejoined Clara Stanley. "I would not deceive you for a moment in such a case: no—not for worlds would I deceive you where your heart's best and purest affections are engaged."

"Oh! this is happiness—this is happiness indeed!" murmured Louisa: and flinging herself into her sister's arms, she wept tears of love, and gratitude, and joy, upon her bosom.

"Dear Louisa, this is the sweetest moment that I have experienced for months past," murmured Clara, in a voice that was tremulous and low.

And then *she* also wept: but we cannot say whether the tears that now streamed down her cheeks, welled forth from feelings as unalloyed with pain and as unmixed with self-reproach as those

which her sister experienced—that fair, bright, and innocent sister whose tears were moistening Clara's heaving breast with their crystal purity!

"And are you sure—very sure of all this, dearest Clara?" inquired Louisa, again raising her head and bending upon her sister a countenance beaming with smiles of innocence and delight. "But, Oh! yes—I see that you are confident, and I will not ask you to repeat your assurance!"

"Rely upon what I say, dearest Louisa," answered Clara. "If I were not thus confident upon the subject, I would not for a moment venture the assertion: if a doubt existed in my mind, I would rather have left you in the belief of your lover's infidelity, than encourage a hope which after all might turn out to be delusive! Not only is your lover innocent, dearest Louisa—but he is one of the most injured and persecuted of men in all that concerns his imprisonment in the Prefecture of Police, and one of the most virtuous and honorable of young men in all that regards his fidelity towards you and the temptations to which he has been subjected."

"O Jocelyn, Jocelyn! to think that I should have mistrusted thee so profoundly!—to think that I should have wronged thee so immensely!" murmured Louisa, shaking her head in despair. "And yet heaven knows that the circumstantial evidence which told against thee, Jocelyn, was to all appearances crushing and overwhelming! For did not the Prefect himself assure me of dreadful things?—did I not behold with my own eyes a scene too well calculated to make me mistrust thee?—did I not even hear that female's voice proclaim her love for thee?"

"Ah! now, my dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, "you are torturing yourself with misgivings, in spite of the certainties which I have breathed in your ears. It is true that I am not acquainted with all the minute details of these matters to which you are alluding: but in general terms I can assure you that your lover is innocent—that he is even of the most rigid virtue—that his purity is incorruptible—and that whatever complexion circumstantial evidence may have been made to assume against him, he will be enabled to clear up every thing!"

"But one word more, Clara," exclaimed Louisa: "one word more—and then farewell to all misgivings! Is he really living under a false name?"

"Yes—that most assuredly he is," exclaimed the elder sister; "and to his honour and credit is this very fact which has been made not only the cause of his arrest, but also one of the grounds of his reproach. But I shall leave to *him*, Louisa, when the time comes, the duty of explaining to you wherefore he has assumed this name of *Jocelyn Loftus* and what his real name is. For I feel assured that these revelations will flow more sweetly upon your ears and sink down more deliciously into your heart, when coming from the lips of a lover, even than from those of a fond and affectionate sister. And now one word more relative to Jocelyn, as we must still continue to call him ——"

"Oh! what else have you to say upon this subject?" asked Louisa with renewed suspense.

"That in a short time—a very short time, I hope—he will be free," returned Clara. "Indeed, I am *convinced* that he will soon be liberated: and then, dear girl, he will no doubt rejoice to give you all those explanations which must triumphantly prove his own innocence and dispel all the misgivings that still perhaps lurk in the depths of your soul!"

"He will be free—O heavens! that there may be no disappointment or delay in the fulfilment of this hope!" exclaimed Louisa, once more clasping her hands and now gazing upward with a fervid enthusiasm, so that it was easy to perceive that in the depths of her soul she prayed to heaven to verify her sister's assurance.

"Whatever I tell you, dearest Louisa, you may rely upon," rejoined Clara. "And now that I have relieved you from so much anxiety and changed your sorrow into heartfelt joy, you must give me all the particulars of what has occurred to you relative to that journey to Paris and this visit to London."

"I will tell you everything, dear sister," answered the young maiden. "You are well aware, from the letters which I have so constantly written to you, that in the month of September Jocelyn brought Miss Mary Owen with him from London and desired that she might find a home at the cottage?"

"Yes—while he proceeded to the Continent," said Clara, taking up the thread of her sister's discourse, "in order to defeat certain machinations which had been devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which the Owen family was concerned. On all these points your letters were explicit enough."

"And I also told you," continued Louisa, "that Jocelyn wrote to me a letter full of love and tenderness from the French capital, stating how he had arrived there in due course and how he had fallen in with Mary's three sisters at Calais whom he had escorted to Paris. I answered his welcome epistle; and he wrote to me another as affectionate as the first. But that was the last letter which I received from him: and then his correspondence suddenly ceased. This was at the end of September."

"And throughout the month of October,' observed Clara, "your letters to me were mournful indeed. You seemed to fancy that your lover had altogether abandoned you——"

"No, no—dearest Clara," exclaimed Louisa, blushing. "I did not *then* suspect his fidelity: but I was afraid—indeed, I was haunted with the idea, that some terrible calamity had overtaken him——"

"Well, and did I not send you all the consolation in my power?" asked Clara: "did I not conjure you to cherish hope and avoid despair?—although at the time heaven knows that I was utterly ignorant of what had really become of your lover!"

"Had it not been for your soothing and consolatory letters," said Louisa, "I should have become delirious with anguish, or else have been plunged into a blank despair. Well, in this manner did the month of October pass mournfully on: and just as it was drawing to a close, I received a letter, dated from Paris, and stating that it was of the highest consequence to me to repair thither without delay in order to learn certain calamitous truths relative to Jocelyn Loftus. That letter, which bore the signature of '*An Unknown Friend*,' desired me to proceed at once to the British Con-

sul on my arrival in Paris, and he would give me farther information. Conceive, my dear Clara, the state of mind into which this letter threw me: and, Oh! *you* were not nigh to counsel me! I felt that it was wrong to leave our poor aunt to the care of a comparative stranger: but on the other hand it would have been madness or perhaps death for me to have remained at home, a prey to the most excruciating suspense!"

"Poor girl!" said the elder sister, hastily wiping her eyes. "No—I was not there to succour you with my advice, although I ought to have been! But go on, Louisa—go on," she repeated, with a sort of nervous impatience. "I can understand full well how it was that you yielded to the impulse of your feelings and resolved upon repairing to Paris. Under the circumstances I should have done the same: and therefore I do not blame you."

"Thank you, dear sister—thank you for that assurance!" exclaimed Louisa, smiling through the tears which had started forth upon her lashes as she spoke of her aunt. "Yes—it is as you have said! Driven wild with fearful misgivings—half frenzied and delirious—hurried along as it were by an overwhelming torrent of feeling, I became powerless for anything like calm deliberation. Mary Owen promised to bestow the most unwearied attention upon my aunt, and to take my place in all tender ministrations towards her. I knew that my young friend was kind-hearted, affectionate, and sincere; and I entertained not the slightest apprehension that our afflicted relation would experience neglect at her hands. Thus, after a few very brief preparations, my departure was taken hurriedly; and without any adventure worth relating, I arrived safely in Paris. Immediately on reaching the French capital, I repaired to the British Consul: and when I mentioned my name, he treated me with a kindness of manner so fully reassuring and even paternal that I was struck with the idea that he himself must be the author of the letter which was signed by *an unknown friend*. But in this respect I was speedily undeceived; for, after a few observations to the purport that an excellent and kind hearted English nobleman was really the author of that letter, and was interesting himself in my behalf, the consul directed me to an hotel close at hand, where I was to inquire for the *Marquis of Leveson*. You may well understand, my dear Clara, that the moment this name struck upon my ears, it carried a vague and unknown terror into the depths of my soul: for although I had heard but little of this nobleman from the lips of Mary Owen, yet this little was not in his favour."

Here we must pause for a moment to remind our reader that when Jocelyn had introduced Mary Owen to the cottage at Canterbury, he had carefully forborne from mentioning to Louisa anything beyond the mere outline of the atrocious conspiracy that was a-foot against the Princess of Wales. Especially did he avoid alluding to the infamous means which had been adopted to demoralize the minds of the fair daughters of Mrs. Owen: and Mary herself, with a proper feeling of delicacy, never subsequently enlightened Louisa in that respect. Thus the reader will understand that when Louisa heard the name of the Marquis of Leveson mentioned by the British Consul, she knew nothing of the *worst phases* of his character, but only that he was one of the Prince Regent's confederates in respect to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales. These circumstances being duly borne in mind, it will be the more easy to comprehend the ensuing details of Louisa Stanley's narrative.

"Yes—on hearing that name of *Leveson*," she continued, after a brief pause, "I felt that it was indeed probable he might know something of Jocelyn and of Jocelyn's proceeding, since his lordship was so intimately connected with the machinations and designs of the Prince and so well acquainted with the Misses Owen. Therefore, after thanking the British Consul for his kindness, I at once repaired to the hotel which he had named; and on inquiring for the Marquis of Leveson, I was introduced to his presence. If you have ever seen him, Clara ——"

"Yes—I—I think I must have seen him," observed the elder sister, with a slight appearance of confusion. "But go on. What were you about to say?"

"I was on the point of observing that his lordship is an elderly, if not an old man," continued Louisa; "and his age, added to the paternal kindness with which he received me, naturally inspired me with confidence. Besides, I was too anxious to be relieved of my dreadful suspense relative to Jocelyn, to give way to much misgiving on my own account; and as he doubtless saw by my looks how torturing that suspense was, he at once entered on the painful topic alluded to in his pseudonymous letter. After a suitable preface, he proceeded with every appearance of gentleness and considerate caution, to unfold a long tale of charges and accusations against poor Jocelyn. Thus at his very first words I was so far relieved as to learn that the object of my affections had neither sustained personal injury nor was dead,—between which calamities my frenzied fancy had been cruelly alternating. But, Oh! if I were indeed relieved from that poignant suspense and excruciating alarm, it was only to hear sufficient to prove, as I then thought, that henceforth Jocelyn was unworthy of the love which I had bestowed upon him! Nevertheless, I could not—I would not—I dared not—put implicit faith in the bare word of the Marquis of Leveson, without corroboration and without proof. Nor did he for a moment appear to believe that I should rest satisfied with mere statements unsupported by evidence. He assured me that his only aim was to save me from becoming the victim of an adventurer, and that his conduct towards me was inspired by the feelings which a father might cherish towards a daughter. In a word, my dear Clara, he spoke so kindly, so reasonably, and so conscientiously to all appearance—and then, too, I was so very, very unhappy, so lonely, and so much in want of a friend and adviser—that I readily promised to be guided by his counsel. He bade me remain at the hotel, assigning me to the care of the landlady and her daughters, who were worthy people, and seeing that I was unhappy, did their best to console me in my affliction. To be brief, the Marquis took me late that same night in his carriage to the Prefecture of Police: and there, as it appeared to me, I received the fullest, the cruellest, and, Oh! the most fatal confirmation of all that his lordship had previously told me!"

Louisa Stanley now related to her sister the

details of all that she had heard or seen at the Prefecture of Police, and which are already well known to the reader.

"My dearest girl," said Clara, "I have already told you that your intended husband does really bear a false name, but that he has assumed it through no dishonourable motives. Therefore, the entry in the Prefect's Black Book is virtually nothing more nor less than a record of a base pretext for a most arbitrary arrest. That the Prefect should have repeated to you the calumnies previously levelled against Jocelyn by the Marquis of Leveson, can be explained either by supposing the French functionary to be as vile as the English nobleman himself, or else to have been easily misled and deceived by that nobleman. Then, with regard to the third incident which appeared to you a corroborative proof of Jocelyn's perfidy —namely, the occurrences of the prison-chambers, —all this doubtless arose from circumstances purposely arranged and cunningly combined at a special moment to produce particular effects. There was an aperture, you say, in the wall between two chambers, and you were led to believe that this aperture had been formed as a means of communication and intercourse between Jocelyn and the female captive who was his neighbour. But, Ah! Louisa, did you pause to ascertain that Jocelyn was a guilty wretch instead of a victim—the creator of the circumstances in which you found him placed, or the victim of them? In fine, had he invited that female to his chamber?—or had she forced herself upon him? You tell me that when you heard him speak within that second chamber whence the light streamed through the aperture, his words were an ejaculation to the effect *that he should be driven mad.* But was that the cry of love or of despair?—was that the language of a passion traitorous to *you*, or of a bitter persecution endured by *himself?* And then, that response

from the female to the effect *that she loved him and that he knew she thus loved him*,—might it not have been addressed to him as a reproach and a remonstrance for coldness, aversion, or inaccessibility on his part? Depend upon it, Louisa, as I ere now said, Jocelyn will give, when you meet again, the fullest and most satisfactory explanations upon all these points."

"Yes, dearest Clara," answered Louisa, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "I indeed see all those incidents in a new light. But what could I think of them at the time? Oh! I was stricken down as if the hand of death had suddenly been laid upon me: I was borne away from the spot—and for several days I remained in a state of delirium at the hotel. But the kindest attentions were shown me by the landlady, her daughters, and the medical attendant: and thus, when my mind began to emerge from the wild confusion of its ideas, I found myself the object of the tenderest solace and sympathy. I wished to hasten back to England—to return home: but the Marquis represented to me the impossibility of my travelling in the nervous and excited condition that I then was; and this representation was warmly seconded by the worthy females to whose care I was assigned. Weak as I was in body and attenuated as I felt in mind, I was over-persuaded without much difficulty. And I have already told you, Clara, how vain were the attempts I made to commit my woes to paper and correspond with you! Thus did day after day pass: and all this while the conduct of the Marquis was so kind, so respectful, and at the same time so fatherly, that I felt assured his character must either have been mistaken or unjustly treated by Mary Owen. To be brief, I experienced the deepest gratitude towards his lordship: I felt that I was indebted to him for being rescued from the snares and influences of an adventurer. But, Oh! while thus I thought in a strain so depreciatory of poor Jocelyn, the scalding tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt as if my heart would burst! It was a relief for me to quit Paris—that place which appeared to be the scene of the fatal rock on which all my fondest hopes were shipwrecked! The Marquis, with a delicacy which entirely confirmed the good opinion I had recently been forming of him, arranged that the landlady's eldest daughter should accompany us as far as Dover, so that I might not be left without female society during the journey. On arriving at Dover, this young Frenchwoman left us to return to Paris, liberally rewarded by the Marquis. Up to this moment, Clara, the idea of proceeding to London had never entered my mind. But as I was journeying with the Marquis from Dover to Canterbury, he represented to me the propriety and even the necessity of consulting my sister—yourself, beloved Clara—and pouring my sorrows into her bosom after all that had occurred. Ah! need I tell you—need I assure you that it required but little argument to persuade me in the adoption of this course? I nevertheless insisted upon halting at Canterbury to assure myself that our afflicted aunt was properly cared for. '*Mary Owen*,' then said the Marquis, '*is deeply prejudiced against me, and fancies that I am engaged in a conspiracy which has no other existence than in her own imagination. She will therefore believe, if you tell her you are travelling with me, that I shall snatch her away from her present retreat and bear her back to her mother. But as I do not wish to interfere with the poor girl, it will be needless for you to create any alarm in her mind. Would it not then be prudent to forbear from mentioning my name to her at all?*'—I yielded to these representations, which appeared to me so natural at the moment;—and besides, my mind was so attenuated that I really had neither the courage nor the power to think for myself, and was therefore easily led to follow any advice that was given to me at the moment by one whom I deemed a friend. I went to the cottage: I learnt privately from the faithful servant-girl that Mary Owen had filled my place with the utmost tenderness towards my afflicted aunt:—and Mary Owen herself gave me the assurance that she had neglected nothing in the fulfilment of the duty entrusted to her. Few and rapid were the words that passed between us. I told her that Jocelyn was faithless to me, and a mere adventurer in society. I told her also that her sisters had proceeded to join the Princess of Wales in Italy: and I assured her that I had the best possible means for believing that the conspiracy against that august lady had in reality no actual existence. Mary Owen was astonished at this declaration on my part: she shook her head gloomily—but evidently was at a loss what to think. I told her to suspend all opinion until my return from London, when I would enter into the fullest and minutest details. Then, after this flying visit to the cottage—a visit which lasted for a brief half-hour—I returned to the *Fountain Hotel* where the Marquis of Leveson's carriage had stopped. Our journey was then pursued towards London, where we arrived last evening."

Louisa Stanley now proceeded to relate the treatment she had experienced at Leveson House—how the Marquis and Ernestina had suddenly thrown off the mask, and how the seasonable and sudden arrival of Sir Douglas Huntingdon had saved her from the treachery and outrage which the profligate nobleman had dared to contemplate. The elder sister was more than indignant—she was positively enraged at hearing this recital of the crowning dangers through which Louisa had that morning passed; and she murmured to herself "Lord Leveson shall repent of this black atrocity!"

"And now, dearest Clara," said Louisa, throwing her arms around her sister's neck, and gazing upon her with all her young heart's innocent and enthusiastic devotion,—"tell me, dearest Clara, are you yourself happy?—do you like the gaiety and bustle of the metropolis?—or do you long to return to the peaceful retreat at Canterbury? Tell me, in fine, all—everything that regards you."

"Yes, dearest Louisa," answered Clara, embracing her fondly: "I will tell you everything—and you will perceive that I have all possible reason to be happy. In fact, dearest Louisa, if I have kept until some such occasion as this—I mean until we should thus meet and I could speak to you concerning many, many things which I could not so well have committed to paper—if I have kept all this till now, I say, you will not be angry——"

"Ah! my dearest sister, you have made me so happy," cried Louisa, "by your assurances relative to Jocelyn, that I am in a humour to behold everything in this world in the brightest and gayest co-

lours. Yes—a roseate atmosphere now appears to surround me, displacing the murky mist in which I have been living, breathing, moving, and also losing myself as it were, for the last fortnight. Tell me, then, that you are happy, dearest Clara: and that assurance, coming from your lips, will enhance—Oh! unspeakably enhance—the joy which I myself now feel. Yes—and I shall be the more happy, too, if it be possible, because such assurance will convince me that *you*, my dearest sister, have not experienced the blighting, withering influence of that atmosphere of fashion in which you have been moving."

"What mean you, Louisa?" asked Clara, gazing upon her sister with so singular an expression that had the young maiden been more experienced in the world's ways, and more deeply read in the science of the human heart, she would immediately have felt uneasy—perhaps dismayed—by that look which Clara fixed upon her.

"I mean," responded the artless, innocent, unsuspecting girl, "that Lady Ernestina Dysart drew ere now such a shocking picture of fashionable life, that she made me shudder."

"Ah! what did she tell you?" inquired Clara.

"Oh! it was indeed very shocking," answered Louisa, "and filled me with a sudden aversion for what is called the fashionable world. Lady Ernestina spoke to me of a certain celebrated beauty—I forget her name at this moment——"

"Try and remember," said Clara, throwing her arm in such a way round Louisa's neck that she drew the young virgin's beauteous head down upon her own fine bust.

"Oh! I recollect now," cried Louisa: "it was Venetia Trelawney."

"Ah!" said Clara. "And what did Lady Ernestina tell you about her?"

"That she was as depraved as she was beautiful," replied Louisa, whose cheek still remained pillowed against Clara's bosom. "But doubtless you are acquainted with everything regarding this Venetia, since her story appears to be the topic of the fashionable world. Only conceive such dreadful depravity as to marry a young, handsome, and clever man, and immediately after the honeymoon lend a willing ear to the improper overtures of that wicked, wicked man the Prince Regent! O Clara, if you ever meet this Venetia—or Lady Sackville, as I believe she is now called—I do sincerely hope you will never speak to her. It positively makes my cheeks glow with indignation and also with shame, when I think that the entire sex to some extent shares in the infamy of such creatures. Ah! and *your* cheeks glow also, my beloved Clara," exclaimed the beauteous girl, suddenly raising her head and observing the deep carnation which overspread her sister's countenance. "Oh! I was well aware that your noble heart would feel as indignant and also as humiliated as I, to think that the name of Woman should be disgraced by such a shameless profligate as that Venetia."

"Let us talk no more of this," said Clara, the deep carnation hue suddenly sweeping away from her cheeks and leaving them very pale. "Yes—yes—the atmosphere of London is indeed unfitted for a flower of innocence and purity such as thou—and therefore must we part soon, dear sister, and you must lose no time in returning to Canterbury. Sir Douglas Huntingdon's carriage will take you to Blackheath or Dartford, where you can obtain a post-chaise: and as it is now but two o'clock, you will reach Canterbury to-night ere it be very late."

"You seem, dear Clara, as if you wished to hurry me suddenly away?" said Louisa, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No—do not think me unkind, my sweet sister," returned Clara: "but I feel that London is not fitted for you—Oh! no, it is not fitted for *you*—and God in his mercy forbid that it ever should be," added Clara, with a strong emphasis.

"Well, dear sister," observed the younger girl, as she wiped away her tears, "I will do as you desire. But recollect that you have not as yet told me one word relative to yourself: and you ere now led me to believe that you had many things to tell me—yes, even secrets, which you had not chosen to commit to paper, but for which you awaited the opportunity of our meeting."

"Oh! I have nothing to tell you of such great importance as you seem to imagine," said Clara, with a smile, which did not however appear to take its inspiration from the full glow of a heart's unalloyed happiness. "You know that fond, loving, and affectionate sisters such as we are, always have a hundred little trifles and sweet nothings to tell each other, and which they treasure up for the day of meeting——"

"Then you have really nothing of importance to tell me?" said Louisa, with a tone and look of disappointment. "I thought you were perhaps going to reveal to me some matters indicative of your own complete and consummate happiness."

"No—that is to say—I mean yes," ejaculated Clara, somewhat falteringly: then in a hurried tone, she added, "But I have already told you, by the bye, in my letters, that my dear kind friends, the Beckfords, have adopted me as their daughter, and intend to leave me all their fortune."

"Yes—you have already told me this," said Louisa; "and I have congratulated you in return: for of course you are well aware, Clara, that your happiness is as dear to me as my own—or even dearer: for I would endure anything sooner than be compelled to hear that you were unhappy."

"Dear Louisa—dear, dear girl," cried Clara, embracing her fervidly and fondly: "and be assured—Oh! be assured, that I entertain precisely the same feeling for you! But we must now part, Louisa—we must indeed: for it is time that you should return homeward; and I am also compelled to leave town again immediately to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Beckford—otherwise I would accompany you part of the distance. But I repeat, Sir Douglas Huntingdon will escort you in his carriage as far as Blackheath—or perhaps Dartford—where he will see you safe in a post-chaise."

The sisters now separated with many reiterated embraces, and also with many, many tears: and once more was Louisa consigned to the care of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. We need only add that the Baronet fulfilled his mission with delicacy and fidelity. He escorted her to Dartford, where he procured a post-chaise for her accommodation; and on parting from the lovely girl he experienced a sensation of ineffable joy to think that he had never once regarded her otherwise than with the utmost respect. 'Tis said that the lion crouches at the feet of a spotless maiden: and assuredly

the gay libertine—the lion of human society—acknowledged the power of virtue and the empire of innocence on the present occasion!

Louisa reached home between ten and eleven o'clock at night, without experiencing any further adventure worthy recording: but it was far otherwise with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as will appear in the following chapter.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

SHOOTER'S HILL.

HAVING acquitted himself thus honourably of the duty confided to him, the Baronet remained to dine at the principal hotel at Dartford; and as his horses had done good service during the day, they required ample leisure for bait and rest. He did not therefore hurry himself as to the hour of departure; and moreover, he fell in with agreeable company in the coffee-room of the tavern. For there had been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood in the morning; and several sporting characters who had taken part in the barbarian "amusement," were now winding up the day's diversions with a good dinner and a jovial glass at the hotel. The Baronet, who liked such company and loved his bottle also, was therefore induced to remain with the convivialists until a somewhat late hour: indeed, it was considerably past ten o'clock when he ordered his carriage to be got ready—and another half-hour elapsed ere he had finished his wine, paid his bill, and set out on the journey homeward.

The footman who was in attendance on the vehicle sate next the coachman on the box; and as the night was very dark, the carriage-lamps had been lighted. But a dense mist, arising from the Thames, was borne by a sluggish northerly breeze over the southern bank of the river, enveloping the main road which the equipage was pursuing. The lamps accordingly shone as dimly as if through the dullest ground-glass; and the feeble glimmering thus thrown forth, was barely sufficient to enable the coachman to avoid the hedges, banks, ditches, or fences, which by turns skirted the road.

The carriage accordingly proceeded at a leisurely pace; and Sir Douglas sank into a sound sleep under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed at Dartford. It was close upon midnight when the equipage began the long, tedious, and gloomy ascent of Shooter's Hill—that spot which, until a very recent period, was so memorable for the exploits of highwaymen. Still the Baronet dozed on upon the comfortable cushions of the carriage: but all in a moment he was startled from his sleep by the abrupt stoppage of the vehicle, followed by the instantaneous plunging of the horses, together with several rough voices speaking menacingly.

Letting down the window, the Baronet became aware that his carriage was attacked by robbers: and having no weapons of any kind with him, he was unable to offer the slightest resistance. Besides which, the night was of such impenetrable gloom that he could literally see nothing of what was going on: but the voices which he heard enabled him to comprehend in a moment that his servants were overpowered, and that the ruffians were menacing them with death if they dared make any farther noise.

Thus far all that had happened since the Baronet was startled from his nap, was the work of a few seconds: and putting forth his hand, he was about to open the door when a couple of fellows came up to the window. One of them immediately seized the carriage-lamp on that side, and thrust it into the vehicle, turning it in such a way that its light fell full upon the Baronet's countenance.

"He's a good-natured looking feller," said one in a gruff voice; "and so I suppose he'll stand summut handsome."

"To be sure he will, Bob" answered the other ruffian. "Now, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Sir Douglas, "your watch, your rings, your diamond breast-pin, and as a matter of course, your purse! If not by fair means, we will have them by foul:"—and he placed a double-barrelled pistol so close to the Baronet's forehead as to cause him to tremble in spite of himself.

"Now, then, be quick, you sir," said the other ruffian, who had been addressed as Bob. "Don't frighten the genelman out of his senses, Buttoner."

"Well, I don't want to, if so be he'll only make haste," observed the individual thus addressed, as he withdrew the pistol from the close vicinage of the Baronet's countenance.

Sir Douglas, perceiving that resistance was vain, nevertheless hoped that if he could only keep the villains in parley, succour might arrive.

"Now, my good fellows," he accordingly said, surveying their countenances by the dim light of the carriage-lamp, and observing that one was a villanous looking man with a black patch over the eye, and that the other, who was called the Buttoner, was a jovial, well-favoured person,—"now, my good fellows, I am quite ready to surrender up everything I have about me, if you like: but as I value my watch and my rings, I will pay you a fairer price for their ransom than you will get for them if you take them from me."

"Well, let's first look at the purse," said Bob—the fellow with the black patch over his eye, and who was no other than the Durrynacker to whom the reader was introduced at Bencull's dark crib.

The Baronet accordingly drew forth his purse, which was found to contain something more than twelve guineas.

"Well, this here ain't no great shakes," cried the Buttoner. "I say, Ben," he exclaimed, raising his voice and turning his head away from the window, "the genelman proposes a compromise for the yack, the fawneys, and so on." *

"Well, let it be so," said a hoarse thick voice in reply: and this indeed was none other than Mr. Bencull speaking, and who was mounting guard on the box over the coachman and footman.

"Wery good," said the Buttoner. "Now, sir, please to step down:"—and thus speaking, he opened the door of the carriage and lowered the steps.

"But where am I to go?" demanded the Baronet.

"Never do you mind," answered the Buttoner: "come along with us—that's all."

* Yack, watch—fawneys, rings.

"Oh! if it be necessary to go any distance, I would sooner give up my personal property at once," said the Baronet, who had thus involved himself in a dilemma which he little anticipated when proposing the compromise: "or else, can I not write you a cheque upon my banker on a leaf torn out of my pocket-book."

"No, no, sir—we don't do business in that way," responded the Buttoner, sharply. "You was the first to propose the compromise; and therefore we'll stick to it. Now then, how is it to be?" he demanded, again appealing to his confederate on the box.

"Oh! let your young woman manage it," replied Bencull.

"Be it so," said the Buttoner: then addressing himself in hasty and imperious terms to the Baronet, he continued, "Now, sir, you will give your servants orders to pay a hundred guineas to the bearer of a letter from you to that effect to-morrow morning; and you will tell them that if so be the young woman doesn't come back with the money by one o'clock to-morrow afternoon, we shall take it for granted that there's been foul play and that she's been took into custody: so that without more ado we shall draw a knife across your throat—do you understand, sir?"

"Yes—yes—perfectly well," replied the Baronet, uncommonly annoyed at the turn the adventure was taking, and inwardly cursing himself for not having surrendered up his jewellery without the suggestion of a compromise. "But you surely don't intend to hold me as a hostage until to-morrow afternoon?" he said, in a tone that betrayed his vexation.

"By jingo, but we do though!" exclaimed the Buttoner. "So no more palaver—but give your orders to your servants, and let the carriage depart."

"Well, since there is no help for it, be it as you say," observed the Baronet, with a philosophical resignation to an adventure which after all threatened to be more inconvenient than perilous: then addressing himself to the footman, he said, "James you have heard what has taken place, and you will tell the housekeeper to pay the hundred guineas to any person who shall present a letter from me to-morrow morning to that effect. You will likewise tell Mrs. Baines that the person presenting such letter is to receive no molestation nor hindrance."

The footman promised a faithful attention to his master's orders: whereupon Bencull relieved that lacquey and the coachman from the terrors of his presence on the box and the imminence of his pistols;—and the instant he alighted the carriage drove rapidly away.

The whole of this scene did not occupy above five minutes, the colloquy which has taken us so long to record having passed with all the haste and hurry of the accompanying excitement.

And now, while the carriage was proceeding on its course, with the coachman and lacquey congratulating themselves on their escape, the Baronet was seized upon by the three ruffians and hurried into the thicket skirting that side of the road which was farthest from the Thames. Through the deep impenetrable darkness did the robbers conduct their captive, to whom it was evident, by the rapid and unhesitating pace at which they advanced, that they were perfectly familiar with the locality. Such indeed was the case: for they were pursuing a beaten pathway through the wood, and in which they were enabled to keep with precision, inasmuch as the sinking of their feet on the damp ground on either side at once made them aware when there was the slightest divergence from that well-trodden path.

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did they thus proceed at a rapid rate. No violence was offered to the Baronet: but a firm grasp was kept upon him, in order to prevent his escape. Scarcely a word was spoken as they thus proceeded through that night of pitchy gloom; and at the expiration of the interval just named, a dim light was observed twinkling a little ahead. In two or three minutes the party halted suddenly at the door of what appeared to be a cottage, or hut, and whence the light had emanated.

The door was opened by another ill-looking rascal, who, we may as well observe at once, was the Mushroom Faker—another of the delectable company whose acquaintance our readers have made at Jacob's Island.

The Baronet was now introduced into a rude and dilapidated room, furnished with one or two benches and a couple of tables made of the roughest materials. The entire aspect of the place was of the most wretched and cheerless description. On one table stood a bottle, a glass, a plate, and a huge knife with a buck-horn handle; for the Mushroom Faker had only just concluded his supper at the moment when his companions arrived with their captive.

"Sit down, sir," said the Buttoner, "and make yourself at home. I suppose there's some kind of lush here," he continued, taking up the bottle and holding it against the flame of a tallow candle with a long flaring wick. "Yes, to be sure there is:"—and filling the glass with brandy he tossed the dram down his throat. "Now, sir, pray help yourself to this here lush; and I can promise you'll find it excellent. In fact, you must make yourself as comfortable as you can, while I go and see what my young woman can do towards accommodating you for the night."

The Baronet made no reply, but threw a look of bitter annoyance round the room, and of disgust upon the Buttoner: then seating himself on a rough stool at the clumsy table, he once more endeavoured to sooth his annoyance and resign himself to the temporary inconveniences of his position.

The Buttoner opened a small door and ascended a narrow staircase, which creaked and groaned beneath his heavy tread—while Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker sat down at the second table and began drinking as fast and furiously as if they had never tasted strong waters before in their lives. It was notwithstanding pretty evident that there was no lack of the alcoholic fluid in the hut, as indeed the numerous bottles which appeared on the shelves of an open cupboard satisfactorily proved.

In a few minutes the Buttoner came down-stairs again; and presenting a sheet of paper, writing materials, and sealing-wax to the Baronet, he said, "Now, sir, you'll please to draw up at once that there letter which is to be delivered to your housekeeper—Mrs. Baines, as I think you called her: coz why, my young woman will get up precious

early in the morning, so as to be at your house in town, wherever it is, by eight or nine o'clock."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately proceeded to pen the requisite instructions for the payment of the hundred guineas to the bearer; and having affixed his signature to the letter, he was about to seal it when the Buttoner leant over his shoulder, observing in a coarse tone of familiarity, "Beg pardon, sir—but I must see what you have wrote, if you please."

"By all means," observed the Baronet, scarcely attempting to conceal his disgust. "But if you did not mean me to close the letter, why did you bring the sealing-wax."

"I fancied you would rayther seal it," was the reply; "so that when delivered at your door to-morrow morning, it won't be read by no one but her as it is addressed to. But all this isn't no reason why I shouldn't see aforehand what the letter really contains. Howsumever, it's all right—and so now you can seal it."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly secured the letter; and having duly addressed it to Mrs. Baines, his housekeeper in London, he gave it into the hands of the Buttoner. This individual once more hurried up the narrow ricketty staircase, at the top of which was a bedroom—if a place with a quantity of dirty flock scattered upon the floor, a wretched coverlid, a rudely-constructed table, a chipped bason, and a cracked ewer, deserves such an appellation.

In this wretched apartment Nell Gibson was seated. A bottle of spirits and a glass stood upon the table; and as the light of the solitary candle played flickeringly upon her countenance, it showed that her features were slightly flushed with drinking. Her apparel was in striking contrast with the miserable aspect of the place. She wore gold earrings: a silk boddice, fitting close to her shape, displayed the luxuriant proportions of her figure;—her arms were bare to the shoulder—and the short skirts of her dress revealed her well-formed ancles up to the swell of the leg. A handsome bonnet and scarf lay upon the bench where she was seated; and when the Buttoner re-appeared this second time in the chamber, she was counting a few guineas which she had taken from a new silk purse.

We have already informed our readers that there had been a grand steeple-chase in the neighbourhood that morning; and great numbers of persons had been attracted to the vicinage of Shooter's Hill, not only from the adjacent towns of Dartford, Woolwich, and Greenwich, but also from the metropolis. To take advantage of this opportunity of displaying their particular genius and exercising their craft, Bencull, the Durrynacker, the Buttoner, and Nell Gibson had appeared upon the scene: while the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling had likewise paid a visit to the same neighbourhood and for the same purpose. Of course the two parties had thus met in pursuance of previous arrangement: but we shall not pause to describe the various ways in which all these worthies, male and female, turned the proceedings of the day and the presence of a large concourse of people, to their own special advantage. Suffice it to say that they managed to reap a very tolerable harvest; and when evening came the two parties took a very friendly leave of each other.

On the one hand, Daniel Coffin, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling repaired to a small, lonely but convenient ale-house at a short distance amongst the fields, to take up their quarters till morning: while, on the other hand, Bencull, the Buttoner, the Durrynacker, and Nell Gibson had already arranged to pass the night at the rude hut in the immediate vicinage of Shooter's Hill.

Now this hut belonged to no less a personage than the Mushroom-Faker. The reader will scarcely require to be told that it was a very convenient haunt for such personages as those just named: and accordingly, when business was slack at Jacob's Island, they often sought the rude hut for the purpose of seeing what they could pick up by nights on Shooter's Hill. It was also a retreat for any member of the fraternity whom circumstances compelled to "keep out of the way" for a while;—and suspicion was averted from the place by the maintenance of an air of the most abject poverty. The gamekeepers of the district fancied that it was occupied only by a poor inoffensive umbrella-mender, who was frequently absent on long journeys: whereas, in reality, it was the scene of many crimes and the hiding-place of many criminals.

We need only add in explanation of present incidents, that Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Buttoner, flushed with the success of their proceedings amongst the crowds collected for the steeple-chase in the morning, had resolved not to allow the night to pass without "trying their luck" on Shooter's Hill. Hence the stoppage of the Baronet's carriage, and the circumstances which led to his introduction to the hut.

We stated that upon ascending the stairs a second time, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson counting her money: and as he tossed her the letter which he had just received from the Baronet down-stairs, he said, "Here, gal, is the dokiment that will produce a hundred guineas to-morrow-morning."

"So much the better," observed the young woman, with a smile of satisfaction: "*this* is something like a night's adventure. Let me see—there's five of us—that will be twenty guineas apiece: because although you and me are now as good as one, yet we go shares as two."

"Oh! to be sure," said the Buttoner: "that's understood! You'll have to start off precious early in the morning, Nell, so as to deliver that letter by eight or nine o'clock, and make sure of the money. Not that it matters much, so far as the swell cove his-self is concerned: for we don't mean to part with him quite so easy. In fact," added the Buttoner, lowering his voice to a whisper, "we don't mean to part with him at all."

"Then what *do* you mean?" asked Nell, in her usually quiet way, as if it were impossible for her to be surprised, startled, or alarmed by any announcement that could be made or any plan that could be revealed.

"Why, the swell cove has got such a handsome yack and chain, such beautiful fawneys, and such a sweet breastpin—besides which, his toggery is so precious good—that it would raly be a sin to let such wallyables slip through our fingers. And therefore," added the Buttoner, in a still lower whisper and with an ominous look, "we mean to put him wery comfortably out of the way. Be-

sides, dead men tell no tales—and since he has seen all our precious faces and would have no trouble in recognising us again, it's much better to give him his gruel."

"Who is he?" asked Nell Gibson. "Do you know his name? Because if he happens to be any great person, there would be such a precious piece of work that no stone would be left unturned till his fate was discovered."

"To be sure I know who he is," returned the Buttoner. "You don't think I should have been fool enough to let him seal up that there letter afore I read it through? But I say, Nell, you don't object to having this swell cove made away with—do ye?"

"Not I indeed," returned this young woman who beneath a handsome exterior concealed the implacable and remorseless spirit of a fiend. "And even supposing I did object, I know very well that if Bencull has once made up his mind, neither heaven nor earth could move him to the contrary."

"Well, he has then, I can tell you," returned the Buttoner: "for although not a word has passed our lips on the subject, yet me and him and the Durrynacker and Mushroon Faker, have settled the plan with our looks."

"I suppose you will wait till I come back to-morrow to say whether I have got the money or not?" observed Nell Gibson.

"There's no use waiting at all," answered the Buttoner. "Whether he's alive or dead at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, won't make no difference in your getting the money: and as for sticking a knife in a feller in cold blood during the daytime, I raly couldn't do it. It's all wery well at night, when one has had plenty of lush to make one plucky——"

"Well, you know best—and it's quite the same to me," interrupted Nell Gibson, with a yawn. "But after all you havn't told me what his name is," she observed carelessly, as she turned the letter over and over in her hand.

"*Douglas Huntingdon* the signature is," answered the Buttoner. "But what's the matter, Nell?" he demanded, as she suddenly dropped the letter on the floor.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" she inquired, stooping down to pick up the letter: then having done so, she looked up in the Buttoner's face, saying, "Why did you ask me that question, I repeat?"

"Because I thought you started and looked queer all of a sudden," was the response.

"Not I indeed," she observed in an off-hand manner, as she steadily met the keen searching gaze which the Buttoner fixed upon her for a few moments. "Do you think he suspects he is in any danger?" she asked: "because if so, it would be well to lull him into security."

"That's just what I want," responded the Buttoner. "I shouldn't like for us all to have to set upon him while he's awake, and so massacre him as one may say. I had much raythor that he would lie down and go to sleep—and then we could do his business all quiet and comfortable, without leaving no tell-tale stains about the place. In fact, I told him just now that I would come up-stairs and see what accommodation my young woman could make for him."

"Well, why don't you go and tell him he can have a bedroom, such as it is?" said Nell Gibson. "Or I tell you what," she added, a thought suddenly appearing to strike her, "if you like I'll go down stairs and invite him to come up here."

"Well, do so if you fancy you'll succeed," replied the Buttoner. "There's no harm in trying it on."

"No harm at all," echoed Nell Gibson: and with this observation she descended to the room below, the Buttoner remaining up-stairs.

The moment she made her appearance in the lower apartment, she threw a rapid look of intelligence upon Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker, who were boozing at one table, while she advanced towards the Baronet who was still seated at the other. The three villains understood by this look that she had some project in hand; and they therefore affected to take no particular notice of her. This was precisely what she wanted: her object was to divert their attention, or at all events cause them to look aside for a moment, while she had an opportunity of making a sign of intelligence to the Baronet Indeed, had she not by such a sign enjoined him to hold his peace, an exclamation of astonishment would have burst from his lips: for Nell Gibson was indeed no stranger to *him*—and he had instantaneously recognised her!

Yes—her form was fuller and grosser, her looks were bolder, and her mien was more brazen than when he saw her last: nevertheless, he failed not to recognise in an instant that countenance which he had once admired, and that form whose virgin charms had been despoiled by him!

The ejaculation, then, of amazement which was about to burst forth, died upon his lips as he caught that signal which she made him: and instantly perceiving by her manner that she had in view some purpose which she wished to conceal from the ruffians at the other end of the room, he suddenly assumed an air of perfect composure, so as not to betray that any secret intelligence existed between them.

"You are sure, sir," she said, holding up the letter, "that this document will meet with proper attention to-morrow morning?"

"I am certain of it," he replied. "The men who brought me hither, overheard the instructions which I gave to my servants ere they departed with the carriage——"

But while Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus speaking, Nell Gibson said in a low rapid whisper, "*Fly hence, I conjure you!*"

Startling as these words were, inasmuch as they revealed to him in a moment all the dangers of his position, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue speaking the sentence which we have recorded;—and thus his voice drowned the whispered accents of the female.

"Well, sir," she said aloud, as if in answer to the observation which he had made,—"I do hope that it will not be a wild-goose chase that I shall have to-morrow morning. And now, sir, as you have got to stay here all night, I am sent to propose that you walk up-stairs and lie down."

But as she thus spoke, she gave a slight and just perceptible shake of the head, as much as to tell him *not* to accept her offer.

"Thank you, young woman," he said aloud, with a look which showed that he not only experienced

a full sense of the danger of which she had made him aware, but likewise the deepest gratitude towards herself,—"thank you, young woman, I would rather not. Presently—when I feel tired—I will avail myself of the offer."

And while Sir Douglas was thus speaking, in such a manner as perfectly to cover Nell's whispered accents, she breathed in the lowest tone the following words:—"*The door is not fastened—watch your opportunity—seize that knife—and escape!*"—then, immediately afterwards, she said aloud, and in a calm placid voice, "Would you like anything to eat, sir? We have provisions in the place; and because you are a prisoner for a few hours, there's no reason why you should be starved."

"No, I thank you—I require nothing," responded the Baronet: and as he threw a rapid, furtive, sidelong glance towards the three men at the other end of the room, he saw in the sinister signs they were making together, a horrible confirmation of the dire alarms which Nell Gibson had excited in his breast.

"I wish you good night, sir," she said: and darting upon him another look of intelligence, she turned away.

Ascending the staircase to the chamber above, she re-appeared in the presence of the Buttoner, who was paying his respects to the brandy-bottle there.

"Well, gal—I see it's no use!" he observed. "The swell cove wouldn't be enticed up here—eh?"

"But he doesn't suspect anything wrong," returned the young woman with the most perfect composure of countenance. "It is quite clear he fancies himself safe enough from danger, and that he will be let loose again to-morrow when I come back with the money."

She then sat down by the side of the Buttoner, with an air as composed and self-possessed as if she had betrayed nothing of the contemplated horrors.

In the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon had remained sitting at the table in the apartment below. Cold—ice-cold was the tremor that seized upon him as he reflected on the appalling perils by which he was surrounded. Though no coward, he could not help shrinking in dismay from the chasm on the brink of which he appeared to stand. As he glanced furtively around upon the three men who were boozing at the other table, he fancied that murder was written upon their very countenances. Averting his eyes in dread horror, he cast them down upon the floor: and, behold! they settled on stains which instantaneously struck him to be those of blood. His looks were startled away from that hideous point of view: and as they swept in frightened rapidity around, they caught *other* stains upon the wooden wall, which likewise appeared to be the marks of blood!

Shuddering to the very confines of his being, the Baronet felt as if he were indeed looking Death face to face. The pitchy darkness of the night that hung like a sable pall against the cottage-window—the awful stillness that prevailed around—the utter loneliness of that hut—the evil reputation of the neighbourhood—the deep solemn hour of midnight—and then those villanous countenances, which seemed more sinister and diabolical still as the faint flickering light played upon them,—all these influences and circumstances combined to fill his soul with a fearful consternation and a horrible dismay!

Scarce a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had refused in disgust the dram of brandy which the Buttoner had offered to him: but now he hastened to pour it out and greedily swallow it to revive his drooping courage. In a moment the burning fluid appeared to flash like lightning through his veins: it was the spark to a whole train of excitement which had been subdued for a few minutes by the weight of an overwhelming consternation.

Yes—all was now haste in his thoughts—hurry in his ideas—a dizzy whirl in his brain. The red right arm of murder seemed to be extended over him: the gleaming blade appeared to be ready to plunge down into his heart;—and his eyes swept wildly around to assure himself that the ruffians were not already standing behind him, or creeping stealthily towards him. No—they were still seated at the table, drinking and talking. The man Benoull had thrown off his coat and appeared in his shirt-sleeves. This in reality was because the night was close, the room was hot, and much liquor had made him feverish: but to the excited imagination of Sir Douglas Huntingdon it appeared as if the fellow were preparing himself to do the work of murder, as a butcher prepares for the slaughter of an ox;—and now wrought up to a pitch of desperation, the Baronet snatched up the knife—made but one bound from his seat to the door—lifted the latch—and darted forth into the pitchy blackness of the night.

With ejaculations of amazement and fury, Benoull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroon-Faker rushed after the fugitive: and those cries of rage, reaching the chamber above, told Nell Gibson that the Baronet had escaped, and startled the Buttoner with the conviction that something was wrong. Rushing down the stairs, he found the lower room empty and the door wide open: and he was about to dart forth and join in the pursuit, when an idea that flashed to his brain, struck him as it were with the sudden blow of a hammer, and made him stop short in the midst of his furious excitement, as a drunken man is sobered all in a moment by some fearful announcement.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE FAIR STRANGER.

THE thought which thus suddenly arrested the steps of the Buttoner and transfixed him to the spot, was that Nell Gibson had betrayed the murderous project to the Baronet.

Our readers will remember a certain conversation which took place a fortnight previously to the present date of our story, between Benoull and the Hangman relative to the employment of Nell Gibson to lead Larry Sampson into a trap. It will likewise be borne in mind that "to make sure doubly sure," in a scheme of so dangerous and delicate a character, they had resolved to plant the Buttoner as a spy upon Nell Gibson's actions. Being well provided with cash and good clothes, the Buttoner had found these proofs of prosperity to be immediate passports to the favour of Miss Gibson; and he accordingly took up his abode with her at Mrs.

Young's delectable establishment in Bermondsey. He and Nell were therefore living as husband and wife together; and we have already shown how it was that they happened to be at the hut near Shooter's Hill on the night of which we are writing.

Now, be it observed that the Buttoner was expressly employed and also bribed by Bencull and the Hangman to watch Nell Gibson's conduct. This circumstance was alone sufficient to render him far more susceptible of misgiving than he otherwise would have been, and more liable to entertain suspicion at the slightest appearance of anything mysterious or sinister. Thus, when he suddenly recollected how Nell Gibson had started, and how strange she had looked for a moment, when he mentioned the Baronet's name to her, he was struck by the idea that she had played the traitress.

Instead, therefore, of rushing out in pursuit of the fugitive, the Buttoner turned back from the threshold of the hut, and faced Nell Gibson just as she reached the bottom of the stairs down which she had followed him.

"You see this swell cove has escaped," he said, fixing his eyes upon her with a keenness that appeared to penetrate her through and through.

"I see it indeed," she answered, encountering his gaze with an unwavering steadiness, although upon her cheek there seemed to be a slight, slight changing of colour, and on the lips the least, least twitching of nervousness.

"What did you say to him just now, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, scarcely knowing what to think, but at all events too uncertain as to her manner to feel justified in accusing her point blank on the spot.

"I merely asked him whether he was sure that the money would be paid to-morrow morning," replied Nell, perceiving that she was suspected, but still maintaining an air of perfect self-possession;

"and when he had assured me that there would be no mistake on that head," she continued, "I asked him whether he chose to lie down to rest or to partake of any refreshment."

"And that was all that took place?" said the Buttoner, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon her.

"That was all," she answered, the colour neither coming nor going now upon her cheeks, nor her lip betraying even the slightest uneasiness. "But whatever mischief may follow from this escape," she observed in a tone of vexation mingled with reproach, "you and the others have only got yourselves to thank for it. You should have made the door fast, and not left the bird an opportunity to fly out of his cage."

"By jingo! what you say is true enough, Nell," exclaimed the Buttoner, feeling how justly merited was the remonstrance: then advancing to the door, which still stood wide open, he listened with suspended breath, while with straining eyes he endeavoured to penetrate the pitchy blackness of the night.

"Well, can you hear anything?" asked the young woman, as he turned back again from the door, leaving it however wide open.

"Nothing — not even the rustling of the branches," he replied, with a terrible imprecation. "Do you know, Nell, this is a very serious business and may end cursed badly? Like infernal fools that we were, we once or twice let slip each other's names; and so, what with knowing these, and being able to describe our precious faces, this swell cove, if he makes good his escape, will be able to give such information against us as shall make London too hot to hold us. Then, my eyes! won't Larry indeed have something to be down upon us for!"

"How provoking," ejaculated Nell Gibson; "and just at the time, too, that I was getting Larry Sampson into such a nice state of credulity, that a few days more would entice him into the trap as safe and sure as possible!"

"Yes—it is deucedly provoking," growled the Buttoner: and once more he went to the threshold and listened attentively. "There's not a sound, not even the waving of the trees:" and again turning away from the door, he tossed off a bumper of brandy.

"What must we do?" inquired Nell, appearing to be very uneasy, although in her heart she knew full well that the Baronet would not be guilty of such black ingratitude as to give any information to the authorities calculated to compromise herself.

"What must we do?" echoed her paramour: "why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from here as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road——"

"Aye, truly!" cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. "Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the *Jolly Waggoner*, where Daniel Coffin and his party are."

"Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery," interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning to think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above: but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sounds of voices below—and recognising Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened down-stairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been re-taken.

Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker had indeed returned, as Nell had just expected: but instead of being accompanied by the Baronet, the first-mentioned of the three ruffians bore in his arms the inanimate form of a beautiful girl, while one of the others carried in his hand a bundle tied up in a shawl.

"What in the devil's name does this mean?" demanded the Buttoner, surveying his comrades with surprise and the senseless damsel with a look of admiration.

"Here's a present for Nell," said Bencull, with a salacious leer as he looked down upon the still and placid countenance of his fair burthen. "Nell will break her in, in the usual style——"

"Aye, that will I!" exclaimed the young woman, who was not only immensely relieved at finding her fears unfounded with regard to the recapture of the Baronet, but who was also much struck with the sweet, touching, and interesting beauty of the fair stranger, whose charms she already resolved upon turning into gold. "Mrs. Gale will give twenty guineas for this young creature: and I daresay the Marquis of Leveson, who is Mrs. Gale's best patron, will give her at least five times as much. But come—bring her up stairs and lay her down on the bed: for this swoon is so deep that it may be dangerous."

Bencull accordingly bore the beauteous girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid, whereon reclined the damsel's beauteous head: and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death, so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks,—yet was there an air of such Madonna-like sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally ferocious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat: and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch, her drapery, humble as it was, seemed to have settled itself in purely classic folds, developing the flowing outlines of the form which it concealed, and displaying the exquisite shape of the beautifully modelled limbs.

It was not however in such an æsthetic light that Nell Gibson contemplated the sweetly re-

posing form of the inanimate maiden: but she did not fail to appreciate all the touching softness and all the tender interest that enveloped the fair stranger as with a halo; so that when she had removed the bonnet and beheld all that silken richness of the flaxen hair, setting off a countenance of virginal innocence—shoulders beautifully rounded and gently sloping—and a bust whose nascent charms were proportioned like a Grecian statue,—the young woman threw upon Bencull a look of delight, as she whispered, "This is indeed a prize that you have brought here!"

"Well, you may thank the night-coach for upsetting just at the brow of Shooter's Hill," returned Bencull.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Nell Gibson, surveying him with a look of astonishment at such a singular remark.

"I mean just this," answered the man: "that as me and the two pals reached the hill in search of that feller Huntingdon, we heard a noise of voices calling out, horses plunging, and all kind of confusion; while lights was dancing about on the spot that the noise came from. So we crept up to the place; and we soon found out what it was. The night-coach for Dover had upset; and there was a rare scene, if so be all that took place in the dark can be called a scene at all. But it wasn't quite in the dark neither; for the coachman and guard had got down the lamps and was moving about to see the extent of the mischief done. '*Here's this sweet young gal*,' says the guard, '*which sat next to me just now: she's pitched right on this bank, and is either stunned or dead*:'—and as he spoke he threw the light on her face and figure in such a manner that me and the two pals caught a full view of her, for she was laying within a couple of yards of the spot where we was hid in the shade. We saw quite enough of her to convince us that she was a sweet pretty creature; and the Mushroom Faker whispered in my ear, '*My eyes! if Nell Gibson only had that young gal in her hands for a week or so.*' These words was a hint; and without any more ado I took the young gal up in my arms the moment the guard turned away to attend to a inside passenger. Finding that her heart beat, I carried her right clean away from the spot, no one seeing the dodge in the darkness and the confusion. The Mushroom Faker kicked against a bundle which he accordingly picked up and brought with him; and as it was quite close to the place where the young girl was laying, I suppose it is her's."

"Well, the occurrence is a fortunate one," observed Nell Gibson: "for Mrs. Gale will pay handsomely for this young creature. She's delicate looking but beautiful as an angel, though I say it who know so little about angels—and perhaps never shall know any more. But what about the Baronet?" she demanded abruptly.

"Oh! he's a Baronet, is he?" exclaimed Bencull. "Yes—to be sure, I recollect there is a Baronet of the name of Huntingdon at the West End—I've heard of him afore: he's a pal of the Prince's. Well, I suppose he has got clean off: and precious awkward it is, too. I must go down stairs and see what our pals say about it. So I'll leave you to take care of this young gal."

With these words the ruffian quitted the chamber: and when the door had closed behind him, Nell Gibson took some water and sprinkled it upon the young damsel's countenance. The effect was soon visible—and slowly did the fair being begin to recover: her bosom rose and fell with the long and painful undulations of returning consciousness;—and opening a pair of the finest azure eyes that ever reflected the pure soul's light of innocence, she gazed up with a look of vacant inquiry into the countenance that was bending over her. Then, as her recollection gradually revived, and all the circumstances of the recent accident were recalled to her mind, she glanced around with an expression rather of gratitude than astonishment: for it naturally occurred to her that she was experiencing the hospitality of some humble dwelling near the scene of the coach-accident.

"Are you injured?—do you feel hurt?" inquired Nell Gibson, in a tone so kind and reassuring that it precluded the springing up of any immediate alarm or suspicion in the maiden's mind.

"No—I do not feel that I have sustained any serious injury, beyond a severe shock," answered the beauteous stranger, in a voice of the most touching melody: and as the colour came back with the delicate tinge of the rose-leaf to her cheeks, but with the deepest hue of that blushing flower to her exquisitely chiselled lips,—and as these lips revealed teeth white as oriental pearls, and exhaled the balmiest breath,—Nell Gibson could not help thinking that she had never seen a lovelier creature than this fair girl.

"You are welcome where you are, young lady," said Nell: "and if you can put up with such poor accommodation as I am able to afford, I shall be truly happy."

"My best thanks are due for your kindness," answered the damsel: and it was with a sort of ill-subdued shudder that she cast her eyes around that wretched, cheerless, poverty-stricken chamber. "But I must pursue my journey this night—I must return to the coach, which will no doubt continue its way——"

"The coach is so much injured," interrupted Nell, "that it will not be able to go on till the morning: and therefore you must make up your mind to stay here. Is that your bundle, Miss?"

"Yes—I thank you," was the answer, as the fair stranger glanced towards the object thus indicated. "But indeed—oh! indeed," she cried, in accents that bespoke a painful and increasing agitation, "I must even pursue my way on foot—for I have promised to be at Dover by a certain hour to-morrow:"—and as she thus spoke, she endeavoured to rise from the flock bed: but sinking back again with the weakness and exhaustion consequent upon her fall from the coach-top, she clasped her hands in a despairing manner—murmuring, "O God! what will *he* think?"

Then a faintness came over her—and she sank down again upon the wretched couch, deprived of consciousness.

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Meantime, in the apartment down stairs, Bob the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker had explained to the Buttoner the accident relative to the night-coach, and the manner in which the fair damsel had fallen into their hands.

"Well, I've no doubt but what my young woman

will turn her to precious good advantage," said the Buttoner. "But wouldn't it have been much better to go on looking after the swell cove, than to bother one's-self about young gals pitched from the top of stage-coaches?"

"This Huntingdon chap, you see, has slipped betwixt our fingers," said the Mushroom Faker: "and to think of looking any longer for him in the midst of this dark night was about as wise as to hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Then we must all bolt off at once," said the Buttoner: "or else the swell-cove will p'r'aps come back with a posse of beaks at his heels."

"Now, then—who's giving way to idle fears like that there?—and where the deuce is the swell cove to get assistance or raise an alarm at this time of night?" demanded Bencull, who had just descended from the chamber above. "The circumstance of his knowing our precious names and having seen all our beautiful faces is the worst: cos why, it will make London too hot to hold us. Now then, I tell you what we will do," he continued, speaking with great rapidity. "There's no doubt this Baronet——"

"Baronet!" ejaculated the Buttoner. "How d'ye know he's a Baronet?"

"Why, your young woman says so," answered Bencull.

"Ah! Nell said so, did she?" observed the Buttoner, all his suspicions flaming up again, more vividly than ever, in his mind: but not deeming the present time a favourable opportunity to mention his misgivings, he said, "Well, go on, Bencull: what are we to do?—what do you advise?"

"Why, I should think," continued the landlord of the dark crib at Jacob's Island, "that the Baronet must have got down into the main road by this time: so either he is making for Dartford or else for Greenwich. Whichever it is, he *must* be overtook and done for, come what will. Now then, you and me, Buttoner, will cut right through the thicket and take the Dartford direction—while you two," he added, addressing himself to the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, "set off towards Greenwich. This is what we ought to have done at first: but it's better late than never—and we're pretty sure to overtake him."

"I'll just run up and let Nell know what we are doing," said the Buttoner.

"Don't stay a moment, then," observed Bencull.

The Buttoner hastened up-stairs and found Nell Gibson hanging over the fair stranger, just at the moment that the latter had sunk down again into a state of insensibility, as already described.

"I'm going off in pursuit of that swell cove, Nell," said the Buttoner, in a hurried manner and without suffering her to perceive that his suspicions were aroused again: "for Bencull says it must be done, and so we mean to dog him until we find him. You must stay here till we come back."

Nell Gibson dared not venture a word of remonstrance against this renewal of the pursuit after Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and on the other hand she experienced in reality no fears for her own safety in remaining at the hut, inasmuch as we have already said she was well convinced that the Baronet would adopt no extreme course calculated to compromise herself.

The Buttoner, having made her acquainted with the intended expedition, paused not to speak another word, but hastened down to rejoin his companions. They then all four issued from the hut, leaving Nell Gibson alone with the fair stranger.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

"THE JOLLY WAGGONER."—FRESH PERILS.

We must now return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was destined this night to pass through so many strange and perilous adventures. At the moment he bounded forth from the hut in the manner already described, he knew full well that pursuit would be instantaneous. Accordingly, instead of rushing away straight a-head and plunging into the thicket in the direction of the road, he at once passed round to the back of the cottage and there posted himself, remaining as still and motionless as a statue. At the same time he heard his pursuers rushing forth from the door on the other side of the building; and as they at once made for the road, the Baronet had reason to congratulate himself on the success of his manœuvre. Not for an instant did the ruffians suspect that he had remained so near: and not only were they thus thrown completely off the right scent, but they could hear nothing—not a footfall amongst the dried leaves, nor the snapping of a twig—to mark the course which the fugitive Baronet might have taken.

Having suffered several minutes to elapse, Sir Douglas Huntingdon stole away from the vicinity of the cottage: and securing about his person the knife which he had brought with him, he proceeded at random through the intense blackness of the night. The reader will therefore understand that Sir Douglas was now advancing in the very opposite direction from that which his pursuers had taken: and while they had become engaged in the adventure of the overturned coach, as already stated, the object of their search was speeding across the fields towards a light that glimmered in the distance.

Cheered by the appearance of this ray, which he hoped would prove the beacon of hospitality as well as the harbinger of safety for the rest of the night, Sir Douglas increased his pace: but still he was compelled to advance with considerable caution, lest in the deep darkness which enveloped him he should fall into some pit, pond, or ditch. In about ten minutes he reached a stile, over which he clambered: and he now found himself in what appeared to be a narrow lane, on the other side of which, exactly facing the stile, stood a small building from one of whose lower windows glimmered the light that had guided him thither. He advanced up to the door: and now through the darkness of the night he beheld an object hanging, darker than the darkness, over its head. For the moment an indescribable feeling of alarm thrilled coldly through his frame: for it struck him that it was a human corpse thus suspended over-head. But the next instant he perceived by its shape, and also by the creaking sound it sent forth, that it was nothing more nor less than the projecting sign of an inn, or rather alehouse.

Encouraged by this discovery in proportion;

he had just previously been terrified, the Baronet felt assured of obtaining an asylum for the rest of the night; and on knocking at the door it was almost immediately opened by a stout red-faced man, with a rubicund nose and a drunken leer, both alike indicating a love of strong liquor. There could consequently be no mistake that this was the landlord; and Sir Douglas at once requested accommodation for the night.

"Well, I don't exactly know how that can be," answered the Boniface, keeping the door only half open, with his own burly form filling up the interval — while the light from within streamed with a sort of Rembrandt effect upon the Baronet, whose personal appearance was thus plainly visible to the landlord.

"How do you mean you do not know whether you can accommodate me?" cried Sir Douglas. "Is not this a house of public entertainment?"

"To be sure it is. The *Jolly Waggoner* is well knowed in these here parts: but there's been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood to-day—and so, you see, I have got as much company as I can well accommodate."

"But is there another inn or tavern near?" asked the Baronet, in a tone of deep vexation.

"No—that there isn't," returned the landlord, still keeping fast in the doorway. "But where do you come from?—and how is it you are out so late? You seem a stylish kind of gentleman, notwithstanding."

"The truth is," answered Sir Douglas, "I am a man of rank and fortune. My carriage has been stopped by a set of ruffians on Shooter's Hill; and I was dragged away to a hut close by. There I should have been murdered, were it not for secret intimation given me by a young woman, of her companions' diabolical intentions. Thanks to her, my life is saved. I escaped—and wandering through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the light shining from your window. Now, then, will you refuse me admission?—for depend upon it, the accommodation which I seek will be liberally recompensed. If you wish to know who I am, my name is Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

We must pause for an instant to acquaint our readers that every syllable of this explanation was overheard by the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling, who had established their quarters at the *Jolly Waggoner* for the night. They had not as yet retired to rest, but had been carousing with the landlord until the moment the Baronet knocked at the front door. As he gave the above account of his adventures, the Hangman and his companions at once comprehended that it must have been Bencull's party who had waylaid the carriage; and they likewise understood that it was to the Mushroom Faker's hut the Baronet had been dragged. But no words can depict their astonishment, when they further gleaned from his explanations that it could have been none other than Nell Gibson who had given him the private information which induced him to escape. The Hangman and Sally Melmoth accordingly exchanged looks of ominous significancy, as they both muttered the name of Nell Gibson: and Jack the Foundling seemed equally amazed and indignant at the evident treachery of that young woman.

Now the landlord of the *Jolly Waggoner* was neither more nor less than one of the members of Daniel Coffin's extensive brotherhood of desperadoes: and therefore, as the Baronet revealed the details of his adventures, the fellow at once understood how he ought to act. But if he experienced any indecision on the point, it speedily vanished as the Hangman's voice reached his ears, in a gruff whisper from the fireplace where he was seated, — saying, "Let him in by all means."

The landlord coughed aloud in order to prevent that whisper reaching the Baronet: and assuming an air of profound civility, he said, "Pray walk in, sir. I am sorry that a gentleman of your rank and consideration should have been so scurvily treated in this here neighbourhood."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly entered the place; and as there was no passage of any kind, he at once found himself in what may be called the parlour or tap-room of that little alehouse. There were numerous Windsor chairs ranged round the walls—a huge deal table in the middle of the room—several spittoons upon the sanded floor—and a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the table were jugs of ale, a tray of pipes, and a paper of tobacco: and seated round the hearth were the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

Daniel Coffin was the first to make way for the Baronet: and so very polite and civil was he, that Sir Douglas failed to receive any evil impression from his particularly sinister countenance. The landlord, remarking "that it was very cold, and that his guest would no doubt like something warm," hastened into a little bar-parlour opening from the end of the room, and speedily returned with a reeking tumbler of brandy-and-water.

"And so, sir, you was unfortunate enough to get robbed, was you?" said the landlord, as he resumed his own seat in the chimney corner. "Only think," he continued, addressing himself to the Hangman, "of the gentleman being compelled to fly for his life. But what a good young woman it must have been that gave him such a hint."

"Yes," observed Daniel Coffin: "I heard the gentleman telling you the story at the door a minute ago; and I thought to myself what a lucky thing it was he got off so nice. But I really tremble for the poor young woman, in case she should be suspected by her companions——"

"Ah! you may well say *that*," exclaimed the landlord, taking his cue from the Hangman's words. "The rascals that infest this here neighbourhood, are the most murderous cut-throats that ever was; and if they only once suspected the young woman——"

"Oh! don't talk of it!" cried Sally Melmoth, pretending to be fearfully shocked: "the bare idea is enough to make one's blood run cold."

"Yes—it would indeed be very shocking," said the landlord, shaking his head with awful solemnity, "if the whole neighbourhood was frightened to-morrow morning by hearing that the poor creature was murdered in that terrible lonely hut."

"Good heavens!" cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had listened with increasing horror and dismay to this colloquy—so that his hair literally stood on end: "is it possible that such a frightful atrocity——"

"Possible indeed!" ejaculated the Hangman:

"aye—and very probable too. You see, sir, I am a farmer, living in these parts; and I have heard too much already of the dreadful character of the villains that infest Shooter's Hill."

"Villains indeed, Lord have mercy upon us!" said the landlord, looking as grave and solemn as his semi-intoxicated condition would permit.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" observed Sally Melmoth, clasping her hands in apparent dismay at the picture which her imagination was conjuring up: then fixing her eyes with fearful meaning upon the Baronet, she said, "Ah! sir, it would be a dreadful thing indeed if the poor young woman who has just saved *your* life, should lose her own on that very account!"

"By heavens, you have filled me with excruciating terrors!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his seat. "I did not think the young woman would run such a dreadful risk—or else not for worlds would I have abandoned her in a cowardly manner. But I see that you are right—they are indeed murderous miscreants—and if they should suspect the poor creature ——"

"I can't sit here quiet," interrupted the Hangman, also springing from his seat, "while perhaps murder is being done. No—I can't do it," he cried, with an air and tone of blunt honesty. "I'll go, even if I go alone—and prevent bloodshed there."

"No, brave man—you shall not go alone," exclaimed the Baronet, seizing Daniel Coffin's hand and pressing it with an effusion of the warmest admiration and gratitude. "We will go together—we will save that young woman if she be in danger: and at any rate we will take her away from her vile companions. See—I am armed with a knife," he added, unbuttoning his coat, and displaying the weapon which he had brought away with him from the hut.

"And I've fortunately got my barkers with me," said the Hangman, producing a pair of pistols. "But come—let us be off. Jack," he added, turning to the Foundling, "of course you will come with us. The more we are, the stronger we shall be ——"

"Oh! you shall not leave *me* behind," exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "I shall go with you. I long to be able to say a kind word to a woman who, though the companion of murderers, has dared to save a fellow creature's life at the hazard of her own."

"Well, you are a brave woman, wife," said the Hangman, pretending to tap her affectionately on the countenance; "and so you shall come. Now then, let us all be off."

The whole of this colloquy—indeed the entire scene, from the instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon crossed the threshold of the *Jolly Waggoner* until he issued forth again—scarcely occupied ten minutes. The theme of the discourse was full of excitement for the Baronet; and he found himself hurried away by a torrent of terrible misgivings relative to Nell Gibson on the one hand, and a chivalrous anxiety to redeem his character from any imputation of cowardice on the other. His feelings, therefore, being kept in a whirl the whole time, he neither had calmness enough to perceive that there was anything sinister in the looks of his new acquaintances, nor leisure to reflect upon the honesty of their motives. But yielding to the impulse which they had so artfully given to his feelings, he unhesitatingly sallied forth in company with the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

They all proceeded across the fields, the Hangman acting as the guide; and it was quite evident that, despite the Egyptian darkness which prevailed, he was well acquainted with the path. But then Sir Douglas Huntingdon remembered that the man had represented himself as a farmer belonging to the district; and it was therefore natural enough that he should be thus familiar with every inch of the locality. They advanced at a pace which was so rapid as to sustain the hurry of the Baronet's thoughts and the excitement of his feelings: and thus he had neither leisure nor scope for those reflections which would perhaps have engendered suspicions in his mind relative to the integrity of his present companions.

"There's the hut!" said the Hangman, as they presently beheld a light glimmering a-head.

"Had we not better approach with considerable caution?" inquired the Baronet.

"Yes—let us creep as quiet as we can up to the place," returned Coffin.

They accordingly advanced stealthily: and as they drew nearer, they observed that lights were burning in the room above as well as in the apartment below. On reaching the hut, they peeped through one of the windows on the ground floor: the candles were flaring with long wicks on the tables—but no one was in the apartment.

"I suppose the ruffians are all out looking for me," said the Baronet, in a low whisper.

"Most likely," responded the Hangman. "Let us enter the cottage."

He accordingly opened the door and passed in, followed by the Baronet, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

But scarcely had the party thus entered the hut, when the Hangman sprang at Sir Douglas Huntingdon like a tiger darting at its prey, and dashed him on the floor with such violence that he was stunned by the ruffianly outrage. The Hangman then tore open the Baronet's coat; and taking away the knife which Sir Douglas had concealed about his person, the ruffian flung it to a distance. His next proceeding was to draw forth a piece of rope from one of his own capacious pockets, in order to bind the Baronet hand and foot.

"I'll go up-stairs and see who's there," said Sally Melmoth, while her paramour was thus employed. "Perhaps that traitress Nell Gibson is up above, as a light is burning there," she added.

"You had better take care," observed the Hangman. "If she suspects that she's found out, she may do you a mischief: for she's not a woman to give in easy, I can tell you."

"Ah! then I had better prepare for a battle!" exclaimed Sally: and flinging off her bonnet and cloak, she seized the knife in one hand and a candle in the other, her whole appearance suddenly denoting the natural ferocity of her disposition when her choler was once excited. "Now if that she-devil, who I always hated and also suspected, should attempt any of her nonsense, I'll plunge *this* deep down into her heart:"—and she brandished the knife menacingly, her countenance, which was by no means bad looking, being now distorted with the workings of diabolical passions.

"Go with her, Jack," said Daniel Coffin, who

was still employed in binding the Baronet's limbs. "I must make this fellow fast, so that he may give no trouble when he comes to himself. But I say, Sal,—and you too, Jack,—mind—no murder up above there! If you find Nell Gibson, which I don't suppose you will, as the place is so quiet—but if you *do*, I say, make her your prisoner: because we will wait till all the other fellows come back before dealing with either her or this Baronet here."

But before he had even finished speaking, Sally Melmoth had ascended the stairs, closely followed by Jack the Foundling. On reaching the top, they pushed open the great clumsy door: and bursting in, they were struck with amasement on beholding a young creature of about seventeen, and of exquisite beauty, sleeping tranquilly upon the wretched couch spread on the floor.

We should now observe that when the fair stranger had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in the manner already described, Nell Gibson had done her best to restore her to life. She soon succeeded: but so weak and exhausted was the lovely damsel in consequence of the fall she had sustained from the coach-top, that she only awoke from a state of insensibility to fall into one of profound slumber. Finding that she thus slept calmly, Nell Gibson had returned to her seat at the table, where she regaled herself with another glass of brandy. The effects of the liquor which she had imbibed so copiously, soon exhibited themselves in a deep drowsiness: and she fell fast asleep in a sort of nook or recess where the table stood. So sound was her slumber that she had not heard the arrival of the Hangman's party—nor even the noise of the outrage upon the Baronet in the room below: but when the door of the upper chamber was burst open by Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling, Nell Gibson awoke from her nap.

In the dulness and drowsiness which hung about her after so insufficient an amount of sleep, and with the fumes of liquor still obscuring her brain, she did not immediately observe who the persons were thus entering the chamber. But in a few moments her sight grew clearer—her ideas more collected: and rising from her seat, she beheld Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling.

"Ah! what—are you here?" she exclaimed, addressing herself familiarly to the Hangman's mistress: but instantaneously perceiving that this woman carried a knife in her hand, and that her countenance was positively hideous with the distortions and workings of dire passion, Nell Gibson saw that something was wrong: with admirable presence of mind, however, she said, "What is the matter?"

"Who is that girl?" demanded Sally, glancing down towards the fair stranger.

"What do you mean by coming up here to me with that knife in your hand, and with these ferocious looks?" asked Nell Gibson, her own spirit rising and her eyes flashing fire upon the Hangman's mistress.

But before any further words were exchanged between the two women, the Hangman himself, having finished binding the Baronet's limbs, made his appearance in the chamber, and was as much struck as Sally Melmoth and the Foundling had been on observing the sweet girl, who, startled by the sound of angry voices, was now opening her eyes in alarm.

"Here is the traitress!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, pointing savagely with the knife towards Nell Gibson.

"Traitress! who do you dare call a traitress?" cried the young woman, fortified—or rather rendered desperate—by the brandy she had imbibed so plentifully.

"Ah! we have got your Baronet, Miss Nelly—we have brought him back with us, I can tell you!" exclaimed the Hangman's mistress in a jeering and taunting tone.

A livid paleness overspread Nell Gibson's countenance as she saw that her proceeding of that night with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was thus positively known: and bold though she naturally was—armed too as she now likewise was with an artificial stimulant—she nevertheless felt her heart sink down completely within her, for she knew full well that *her's* was a treachery which her companions in crime seldom forgave, and the punishment of which was *death!*

"Ah! you see that she is guilty—her looks betray her!" yelled forth the infuriate Sally Melmoth: and raising her knife, she sprang like a tiger-cat towards Nell Gibson, who, cruelly alarmed, fled screaming horribly into the nook where the table stood.

"Do not murder her, Sal!" cried the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he seized upon his enraged mistress and threw his arms round her to hold her back, while Jack the Foundling proceeded to wrest the knife from her grasp.

But here we must observe that although only just awakened from a profound slumber, the fair stranger was nevertheless startled into the fullest consciousness by the fearful scene that thus suddenly burst upon her vision. Instantaneously comprehending that instead of being beneath some hospitable roof, she was in a den of murderous miscreants, the affrighted girl sprang up from the bed and rushed to the door. Terror—the keenest, acutest, most poignant terror—gave her wings that made her movements rapid as the lightning-flash: and all her senses being suddenly endowed with the most vivid clearness, in this moment of life or death, it was no wonder if she observed that on the outer side of the chamber-door there was a large bolt. With admirable presence of mind she dashed the door to, and with her taper fingers shot the bolt into its socket: then precipitating herself down the stairs, not knowing what obstacles she might have to encounter, she alighted in the chamber below.

At first it struck her as being empty: but an ejaculation of mingled surprise and entreaty reached her ears—and then her eyes fell upon the Baronet who had just returned to consciousness. Without wasting a single moment in words, the courageous girl proceeded to action: and observing that a cupboard stood open, she threw a rapid glance upon its shelves. A knife was what she sought for—and a knife did she find accordingly. In another instant she was upon her knees, cutting the cords which bound the Baronet's limbs.

It was a moment of awful suspense and excruciating alarm for both. The Hangman was thundering at the door above, evidently dashing himself with all the weight of his form against it,—while the

process of cutting the cords was calculated to occupy nearly a minute. A minute!—Ah! it is nothing in the ordinary events of life: but it is an age—an entire age—when life itself is trembling in the balance or hanging to a thread!

But now the last piece of cord is cut—the bonds fall off the Baronet's limbs—and starting to his feet, he grasps the hand of his fair deliverer with an effusion of gratitude that is in itself a love—a worship—a devotion!

"Away, dear girl—away!" he cried, retaining that fair hand in his own that he might guide her from the hut.

At the same instant the door of the chamber was burst open: but with such fury did the Hangman precipitate himself down the stairs, that missing the steps he fell heavily from top to bottom. To this circumstance, perhaps, did the Baronet and his fair companion owe their safety: for as they darted forth from the hut, plunging into the utter darkness of the night, they had the advantage of the few moments which were lost by Daniel Coffin in picking himself up and trying his limbs to feel if any were broken. Then forth he sped in pursuit of the fugitives,—Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling remaining behind him to keep guard over Nell Gibson.

Sir Douglas proceeded at random as he guided his fair companion, thinking less of taking any special direction than of placing as great a distance as possible between themselves and the hut. Speedily emerging from the thicket, he paused for an instant to listen whether there were any sounds of pursuit; but he could hear nothing save the heart-beatings of that young girl who now clung with apparent exhaustion to his arm.

"We are not pursued," he said in a hurried whisper: "do you think you can walk a little way farther—only a little way?—and then perhaps we shall reach some place of safety."

"Yes—O yes!" she murmured, in a tone that nevertheless was fraught with the accents of desperation. "I feel that I am sinking—and yet I must proceed—our lives depend upon it!"

"Oh! for God's sake, make an effort—make an effort!" whispered the Baronet, in a tone of intense earnestness: and scarcely caring for himself at the moment, he felt as much—yes, as profoundly—for this sweet girl as if she were a beloved sister or one whom he had long loved and who was to become his wife.

They advanced again, his arm thrown round her slender waist to support her; and in this manner they proceeded for about ten minutes. Their eyes, growing accustomed to the deep darkness, enabled them to distinguish the obscure outlines of the path which they were pursuing; and to the joy of the Baronet, he found that they were rapidly nearing the main road. But his fair companion now grew so faint that she clung to him like a dead weight: and he had to carry rather than support her. That sudden flaming up of her courage, her spirit, and her presence of mind in the hut, had led to a reaction which was gradually prostrating her completely; and by the time they emerged from the fields into the high road, the Baronet was made painfully aware that she was fainting in his arms.

At this moment the sounds of rapidly approaching wheels were heard, and coming too in the same direction which they were pursuing. In a few moments the lights of a vehicle appeared; and on the Baronet hailing it, to his joy it proved to be a return post-chaise journeying empty to London.

We need hardly say that he took immediate possession of it, carefully placing his fair companion upon the cushions inside: and on reaching London, she was consigned in a state of alarming exhaustion to the care of the Baronet's housekeeper Mrs. Baines.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERESTING INVALID.

After a profound slumber of some hours' duration, the fair stranger awoke to find herself lying on a comfortable couch, in a handsomely furnished chamber, and with a motherly-looking person standing by the bed-side. The heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, and the room was darkened evidently for the purpose of preventing the invalid's slumber being disturbed by a glare of light: but through an opening in the drapery stole a golden beam of the sun—and thus the damsel knew that it was broad daylight without.

Then, as a crowd of memories rushed into her brain, a strong shuddering shook her; and it seemed as if some source of ineffable anguish were rending her very heart-strings.

"My poor girl, what ails you?—what do you feel?" asked Mrs. Baines, bending over her and speaking in a tone accompanied with a look of such true maternal kindness that the tears gushed out from the maiden's eyes as if all the founts of her tenderest and deepest feelings were opened. "You have something that troubles you very much, my dear child—something that afflicts you sorely," continued the housekeeper. "I do not ask you to reveal to me your secrets; but remember that you saved the life of my master, Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and therefore, through a feeling of gratitude—if for no other motive—am I anxious and ready to do anything to serve you."

The fair girl gazed up with a look of unspeakable feeling at Mrs. Baines; and then her lips moved as if a revelation were wavering upon them; but whether it were so or not the good woman could not precisely tell. At all events, before the invalid had time to utter a word, the door opened and Dr. Copperas entered the room.

"Ah! here is the doctor," whispered Mrs. Baines to the invalid: then turning towards the physician, she said, "I am glad you have come, sir—for this poor dear girl here seems dreadfully exhausted."

"Well, Mrs. Baines, we shall soon put her to rights," said the physician, seating himself by the bedside and proceeding to feel the damsel's pulse. "Sir Douglas sent for me three or four hours ago—indeed at nine o'clock this morning, I believe——"

"Yes, sir," observed Mrs. Baines: "and now it is past mid-day."

"True: but I was at a consultation with that very remarkable and extraordinary man Doctor Thurston. Indeed, Mrs. Baines, if it were possible to change conditions in this world, and if I

had my choice, I think I would sooner be Doctor Thurston than any one I know."

"Well, sir, this is most singular," observed the housekeeper: "for I remember that about six weeks ago, when our coachman broke his leg and you were out of town at the time, Sir Douglas called in Doctor Thurston, and I recollect that the Doctor whispered to me after he had given his opinion on the case, that it was precisely one which you, sir, ought to have superintended."

"Did he though? Well, that is very remarkable," cried Doctor Copperas, affecting to be quite amazed: then turning to the fair stranger, he said, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon has just explained to me all the incidents of the preceding night so far as they relate to himself. Had you been long in that hut whence you both escaped so marvellously? —and had you been ill-treated during your stay there?"

"I had not been there, sir, more than an hour or two," was the answer, "when the incidents occurred which led to our escape; and I certainly received no harsh nor severe treatment:"—then, after a short pause, the damsel continued to observe, "I had taken my place on the outside of the night-coach for Dover—it was upset on Shooter's Hill—and I must have been stunned by the fall, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in that hut."

"Excuse the question I am about to ask," said Doctor Copperas. "Had you previously been suffering from privations or sorrows?"

But the damsel suddenly burst into tears: and the physician, although by no means of tender disposition, was touched by this eloquent yet silent response to his query.

"Ah! poor girl—exhaustion—general debility—too great excitement—fearful reaction," muttered the doctor to himself. "Well, you will be taken care of here; and I shall come and see you again

in the evening. Now, Mrs. Baines, pen, ink, and paper, if you please, and draw the curtain a little."

The housekeeper hastened to obey these instructions; and Doctor Copperas proceeded to write the prescription, observing as he did so, "that he felt convinced he was about to adopt the very same treatment which that eminent and remarkable man Doctor Thurston would have recommended had he been called in."

Having concluded his Esculapian hieroglyphics, he turned towards the bed, saying in a bland tone of inquiry, "And now, what is the name of my interesting patient?"

At the instant that the doctor began the first words of his question, the damsel's cheeks were colourless as alabaster: but scarcely had the final syllables fallen from his lips, when all the blood in her veins seemed to rush to her countenance, suffusing it with the deepest crimson.

"Ah! my dear child," cried Mrs. Baines, "if the Doctor has said anything indiscreet, do not annoy yourself. God knows you can bear no more excitement! I am sure when you were brought home here at three o'clock this morning, in such a state of exhaustion that you could not speak, and your very reason seemed to be abandoning you ——But, heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, suddenly interrupting herself as a fresh torrent of tears now gushed out from the poor girl's eyes: "what ails you, my dear child—what ails you?"

The damsel could however give no response, even if she wished to do so: her voice was lost in deep and suffocating sobs;—but looking up with an expression of ineffable gratitude upon her countenance, she took Mrs. Baines's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"There, there," said Doctor Copperas, "I am afraid I said something indiscreet: but I would not wound the poor girl's feelings for the world. As for the prescription, I have made it out in the name of *Miss Smith*, which by the bye is the name that in similar circumstances is invariably adopted by that ornament of the profession, Doctor Thurston."

Doctor Copperas now took his leave; and when he was gone Mrs. Baines addressed the invalid in the kindest and most endearing manner that she could possibly adopt: for the housekeeper was indeed an excellent-hearted and worthy woman; and though in the service of a master renowned for his dissipated habits and rakish conduct, she herself was of unimpeachable respectability.

"Now, my dear girl," she said, bending over the couch and whispering with soothing softness of tone in the invalid's ear, "you have some secret grief which is gnawing at your very heart's core. I do not ask you to tell me what it is: but *I do* ask you to tell me if there is anything that can be done to alleviate it. Should you choose to trust me, you would find that I would go fifty miles to serve you, but not raise a finger to injure you. I saw plain enough that you did not like to mention your name; but I am sure that if there is any harm attached thereto, it is not you yourself who have brought the stain upon it. No—there is innocence in your looks—the candour of purity upon your brow—Ah! and the manner in which you now regard me proves that I am right in believing you to be the dear good girl I hoped and wished the first instant I saw you. But even if you *had* done anything wrong, there is forgiveness to be obtained. Oh! now I see again, by that deprecating look so softly earnest, that it is not so. No—you are all that is good—I am certain you are. Tell me, then, dear child, what can be done for you: and recollect that my master owes you so deep a debt of gratitude, there is no trouble he would shun and no expense he would spare to render you a service and lighten your heart of the load of affliction."

"My kindest, best friend," exclaimed the invalid, throwing her arms around the neck of the good housekeeper, "I will tell you everything. Yes—I will tell you all: and then you will comprehend wherefore I am unhappy—why I am tortured with a devouring suspense—and also why I hesitated to mention a name which nevertheless, God knows, has never been disgraced by *me*. But Oh! before I commence my narrative—let me beg of you—let me implore you to grant me a boon——"

"Speak, dear child!" exclaimed the housekeeper: "what is it?"

"Will you procure me a newspaper of to-day?" said the fair stranger in a low soft tone, as if she even hesitated to solicit so trifling a favour.

"In a moment," cried Mrs. Baines: and disappearing from the room for a short time, she returned with a morning journal, saying, "Sir Douglas always takes this newspaper, and therefore it was handy in the house at the moment."

But while she was thus speaking, the invalid, with a sudden access of frenzied excitement, had snatched—or indeed, rather torn the journal from the matron's hand; and sitting up in the bed, as if that feverish excitement had nerved her with sudden strength, she ran her eye over the columns with the breathless suspense and excruciating uncertainty of one who is about to behold the clearing up of a matter of life or death.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, "he is safe!"

Then, as if this sudden acquirement of a certainty and abrupt term to a harrowing suspense, were to be followed by a re-action proportionately strong and painful, she fell back in a state of utter prostration alike of mind and body. Mrs. Baines hastened to administer a cordial and apply other restoratives: but hours elapsed, and evening was drawing its veil of obscurity over the hemisphere, before the invalid had so far recovered as to be enabled to converse again. Then with only a few brief words of preface, to the effect that she yearned to unbosom the secrets that lay heavy upon her soul, the poor girl poured forth her revelations to the friendly ear of the matron.

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Two hours later—indeed, at about nine o'clock that same evening—Mrs. Baines and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were closetted together in earnest deliberation.

"Ariadne Varian," said the Baronet, repeating the words several times. "How prettily the name sounds: it is really most appropriate for such a charming creature. Do you know, Mrs. Baines, that I really feel —— But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself.

"Ah! sir, I know what you were going to say," observed the housekeeper: "and really if you

would not think it rude nor unbecoming on my part, I should so earnestly advise you to think of marriage ——"

"Well, well," said the Baronet, laughing; "I suppose I must think of it some day or another. But let me read over again this paragraph relative to poor Ariadne's brother; and then you shall tell me at full length and in detail, all those incidents that you have gleaned from her lips and which you have as yet only sketched so briefly to me."

"Please to read the passage aloud, sir," said Mrs. Baines: "for I only glanced hurriedly over it just now."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly took up the newspaper and read aloud the ensuing passage:—

"It will be in the recollection of our readers that at the last sessions of the Old Bailey, a respectable-looking and genteel young man, named Theodore Varian, was sentenced to transportation for seven years for embezzling monies and falsifying accounts while in the service of Mr. Emmerson, the well known stock-broker of Birchin Lane. On the trial, it will be borne in mind, the young man pleaded guilty, and told a somewhat pathetic tale relative to having made free with his master's money to pay debts contracted during a beloved sister's illness. Up to this point the sympathy of the whole court had been evidently in his favour; but it will be remembered that he proceeded to accuse Mr. Emmerson of having held out threats and made infamous proposals relative to his sister. As a matter of course, Mr. Emmerson indignantly denied the imputation; and the learned Recorder, to whom Mr. Emmerson's high character in the City is of course well known, told the prisoner very plainly that all previous sympathy excited in his behalf, was not merely destroyed, but was succeeded by loathing and contempt for this base endeavour to calumniate his employer. Hence the severe sentence of seven years' transportation which his lordship deemed it right to pass upon the prisoner.

"We have recapitulated these facts which were before published in our columns, in order to remind our readers of the artful cunning and unprincipled disposition of this young man, whose external appearance and genteel manners at first enlisted so much sympathy in his favour. And if any farther proof were wanted of the right estimate which the learned Recorder formed of his consummate duplicity, such proof will be found in the occurrence we are about to relate. In a word, this Theodore Varian escaped from Newgate last night in a very remarkable manner. It appears that during the day the order had been received for the removal of himself and other convicts to Woolwich, preparatory to their departure for the penal settlement. As the order arrived suddenly, the convicts were permitted to see their friends until a late hour last evening; and it is remembered by the gaol authorities that Theodore Varian was visited by his sister, who was clad in an ample cloak. At nine o'clock the bell rang as a signal for all visitors to depart; and as there were some fifty or sixty strangers, male and female, at the time, it is supposed that Varian must have suddenly slipt on his sister's cloak, and probably a bonnet and veil which it would have been easy for her to conceal under that cloak. At all events, shortly after the strangers had departed, Theodore Varian was missed; and the above explanation is the only solution that can be given as to the mode of escape. Up to the hour of going to press, we have not heard of his recapture."

"And the conjecture, then, relative to the method of the escape, is the right one," said the Baronet, as he laid down the newspaper. "But you must now give me all the details of Ariadne's narrative."

"With much pleasure, sir," replied Mrs. Baines. "It appears that Theodore and Ariadne are orphans, and that they entertain the sincerest affection for each other—an affection not only natural in consequence of the ties of brother and sister, but also strengthened by the keen appreciation of that orphan lot which they have together endured from childhood. It is true that Theodore self-appropriated some of Mr. Emmerson's money; and I feel confident it is also true that the hard-hearted, griping, greedy citizen *did* tell the unhappy Theodore that if within three days he did not prepare his sister to surrender her honour, the worst should ensue. This was towards the close of September; and for the three following days Ariadne says that her poor brother seemed to be frenzied with grief. It was not until the third night that he revealed to his sister the horrors of his position and the deeper infamy into which Emmerson tried to plunge them both. Ariadne was at first distracted: but in a short time the natural strength of her character enabled her to speak with calmness upon the position in which herself and unhappy brother were involved. To be brief, they saw no alternative but flight;—and having hastily disposed of everything saleable, and thus reduced the amount of their worldly possessions to the compass of two small bundles containing changes of raiment, they fled from the metropolis."

"Poor orphans!" said the Baronet, in a low tone and with an involuntary sigh. "But go on, Mrs. Baines—go on."

"They got a lift in some vehicle as far as Hounslow, where they passed the night. In the next room to the one where Varian slept, two persons of evidently queer character were lodged; and not being aware that the partition was so thin as it was, they conversed unrestrainedly. Theodore could not help hearing every word they said; and he found that they were two highwaymen. They were boasting of their exploits; and from what they said it appeared that there was always a much better chance of an offender against the laws concealing himself in London than in any country districts. In fine, their discourse made such an impression upon Theodore, that he resolved to retrace his way to the capital. In the morning he communicated to his sister all he had overheard, and the resolution he had formed in consequence; and accordingly, when night came again they returned to London. Hiding themselves in a garret in some low neighbourhood, they passed a fortnight in a state of continual terrors, apprehensions, and alarms. They also lived most frugally—even miserably—in order to eke out their scanty resources. Poor orphans! how often and often must their tears have been mingled as they thought of the present and the past, but dared not look forward to the future! Oh! it makes my heart bleed to think what this dear sweet girl must have suffered. Is it not shocking, sir, that such a heavenly creature—such an angelic being—should be doomed to know such bitter affliction? Only fancy those soft azure eyes weeping such bitter tears—only fancy those lovely pale cheeks, just like damask, being scalded with floods of anguish!—Ah! and fancy too, that those lips which look like rose-buds, should ever wreath otherwise than in the sunniest smiles."

"Mrs. Baines, you are growing quite poetical," said the Baronet, who was in reality deeply affected. "Come, pray proceed," he observed hurriedly: "you were telling me how this poor girl

and her brother lived for a fortnight in that wretched garret. Psha!" he suddenly cried: "what the deuce is the meaning of this?"—and he dashed a tear from his eye.

"Shall I give you a glass of wine, sir?" asked Mrs. Baines, perceiving that he was profoundly touched, and thinking that he required something to console him.

"No—not a drop, I thank you—I never was less in a humour to drink in my life," he exclaimed. "Pray go on."

"Well sir, at the end of that fortnight the young man resolved to make an endeavour to find employment under another name. He accordingly went out to seek for such employment; but as several hours passed and he did not return, poor Ariadne could no longer restrain the terrors that were devouring her. She rushed forth wildly to seek for him—to make inquiries after him: and she soon learnt the fatal truth. He had been arrested—taken before the Lord Mayor—and committed to Newgate! O God! I can enter fully and deeply into the anguish which the poor girl must have experienced as these terrible tidings burst upon her! Of course I need not say that from the day of his arrest to that of his escape, she visited him as often and remained with him as long as the prison regulations would allow. The sessions were being held at the time when he was arrested; and he was tried a few days after. This was a month ago. You have seen, sir, by the newspaper that he pleaded guilty, and that he was condemned to seven years' transportation. If he had not told the truth about Emmerson's infamous proposals, he would perhaps only have had two years' imprisonment: but because he boldly endeavoured to unmask the villain, the Judge threw aside all sympathy."

"You see, Mrs. Baines, Emmerson is a man of wealth," observed the Baronet,—"a man of high standing in the City—a member of the Common Council, too—and what is more, a staunch Tory. Besides which, he has got a splendid house at Clapham; and no doubt the Recorder frequently dines with him. So you perceive it is easy to account for the Judge's behaviour on the bench in Theodore Varian's case. But now for the rest of your narrative."

"A few more words will conclude it, sir," said Mrs. Baines. "From the moment of Varian's condemnation, he and his sister never lost an opportunity of discussing the possibility of his escape. The hope of effecting this alone sustained them. Ariadne tells me that she has lain awake whole nights, pondering upon the chances for and against such a consummation. She says that for hours and hours her thoughts have never wandered away from this one subject. At length the plan was settled;—and yesterday was the day for carrying it into execution. Having half-starved herself to eke out her scanty resources, the poor girl had just sufficient to enable her to pay her own coach-fare to Dover, and afford her brother a few shillings to purchase food during his journey thither. The newspaper tells you how the escape was accomplished. No sooner did Ariadne find that the project had succeeded, and that her brother, disguised in the cloak and bonnet, was safe outside the terrible doors of Newgate, than she almost went mad with the delirium of joy. But she was compelled to part immediately from Theodore, for fear of exciting suspicion and affording a trace for pursuers: and while he set off on foot on his journey to Dover, the young maiden took her place outside the night-coach. Of course their ultimate intention was to escape over to France, the captain of one of the hoys plying between Dover and Calais being well acquainted with the Varians and well disposed towards them. In conclusion, sir," added Mrs. Baines, "let me observe that when poor Ariadne entreated for a sight of the newspaper, it was to ascertain whether her brother had got safe away or had been re-captured after she parted from him."

"And you have got the exact address where she was to meet her brother at Dover?" said the Baronet inquiringly.

"I wrote it down on this slip of paper, from Ariadne's own lips," responded Mrs. Baines: "and here it is."

"Well, I wonder now whether that fellow James is ready to take his departure," cried the Baronet, looking at his watch. "It is nine o'clock."

But at this moment the door opened; and the valet James made his appearance, muffled up as for a journey.

"Now, James," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a serious tone, "I can of course rely upon you, as this matter is one not only of delicacy but also most confidentially sacred. You will travel with all possible speed to Dover;—and there you will seek this address," continued the Baronet, placing the slip of paper in the servant's hands. "You will ask for *Theodore Varian:* and when you mention the name of *Ariadne* as a pass-word you will obtain access to this same Theodore. You will then give him this purse; and urge him to lose no time in escaping to Calais. Tell him that his sister has found kind friends in London—and that moreover measures will be taken to obtain a free pardon for himself. You may add that in the course of a day or two his sister will write to him full particulars, addressed to the Post-Office in Calais."

The Baronet placed a heavy purse in the hands of his faithful servant, who forthwith took his departure in a post-chaise for Dover: and the moment he was gone Mrs. Baines returned to Ariadne's chamber. The fair invalid was just awaking from a deep slumber, in which the good housekeeper had left her ere now:—and the assurance that the messenger had departed to meet her brother at Dover, relieved her gentle breast of its chief anxiety. Doctor Copperas presently paid her another visit, and declared that she was going on as favourably as he could expect, adding aside to Mrs. Baines, "that he did not think she could have progressed better since midday, even if under the care of that eminent and distinguished man, Doctor Thurston."

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE RAKE AND THE RAKE'S VICTIM.

SCARCELY had Mrs. Baines quitted the apartment where she had been conversing with the Baronet, when a domestic entered to state that a female desired to speak with him upon important business. Not knowing who she might be, and never refusing a female visit, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ordered her to be admitted. A woman, somewhat flauntingly

dressed and with a dark veil over her countenance, was shown in: but the instant she crossed the threshold, and even before she raised the veil, the Baronet guessed who she was. Nor was he mistaken: for advancing towards him, she lifted her veil and disclosed the features of Nell Gibson.

"Ah! I am glad you are come—I am delighted to see you are safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the most unaffected sincerity. "But, good heavens! how did you escape from those murderous wretches? I have been tortured with the cruellest alarms concerning you. At one moment I was resolved to give information at Bow Street of all that had occurred: but then I feared that if you had really escaped after all, I should only be compromising you—and *that*, for many reasons, you are well aware I would not do for the world. Besides which, I felt assured that if you escaped the dangers and the violence that were imminent at the moment I left the hut, you would escape altogether."

While the Baronet was giving vent to these rapidly uttered expressions, Nell Gibson seated herself near the fire, and gazed upon him with a species of tender interest that seemed strange indeed with one who led such a life and possessed such a heart as she.

"And how knew you," she said, in a gentle and even tremulous voice, "that such dangers menaced me?"

"In the first place because I discovered, when it was too late, that I had revealed to a set of miscreants the kindness you had shown towards me," answered the Baronet;—"I mean that man, that woman, and that youth whom I accompanied back to the hut. Moreover, when I recovered my senses while bound hand and foot in the room below, I overheard the accusation of '*traitress*' levelled against yourself, and then your piercing screams. Ah! Ellen, I can assure you that those screams have rung in my ears ever since!"

"And the young girl whom you brought away with you?" said Nell Gibson, inquiringly.

"Oh! she is safe and will be taken care of," returned the Baronet. "But wherefore was she borne to the hut?"

"Do not ask me," said Nell Gibson. "For no good, you may be sure! Ah! you do not appear satisfied with what I say? Well then, it was to make her as bad as I am."

"Enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with a shudder; and then he fixed his eyes upon Nell Gibson, as if to scrutinize thoroughly her entire appearance.

"Ah! you may well look at me," she cried in a tone of bitterness: "I am no doubt changed since first you knew me. That was four years ago. I was then a merry laughing girl of between fifteen and sixteen—yes, and an innocent girl too——"

"Do not think of the past, Ellen," said the Baronet, scarcely able to suppress a sigh as he mentally compared the young woman as she *now* appeared with the young girl as she *was* a few years back. "You last night perilled your life to save mine: tell me, then, what can I do for you?"

"You will give me the hundred guineas for this letter," she said, producing the one which he had written at the hut. "That is all I ask of you—and it will be the means of saving my life."

"Can you fear for a moment that I shall hesitate?" exclaimed the Baronet. "I will give you the hundred guineas wherewith to appease those vile men; and I will give you another hundred guineas—aye, or even three or four hundred, for yourself."

"No—not a shilling—not a farthing," said Nell Gibson, firmly and decisively. "Since the day I left you, never, never have I sought succour at your hand: and I would sooner perish—yes, perish miserably—than receive such succour from *you!*"

"But wherefore, Ellen?" said the Baronet, in amazement. "There is something unnatural—something perverse in this."

"No—it is natural enough, if you do but understand the mind of a woman. Since I left you I have endured many and many privations: I have known what it is to want bread—aye, I have known what it is to feel starvation! Or else do you think, if it had not been through some desperate necessity, I should ever have fallen into the company in which you found me last night? But even when perishing as it were with famine, I never once applied to *you*."

"But you were wrong, Ellen—you were wrong," said the Baronet. "Whatever had occurred, my purse would always have been open to you."

"Oh! yes—I knew *that;* and it was the thought of your kindness that stung me to the very quick. And therefore, so far from being wrong," she exclaimed, suddenly assuming a proud look that for a moment rendered her really and truly handsome—"so far from being in the wrong," she repeated, "I was in the right: for although fallen so low and become so debased, degraded, and vile, I still had my own little feelings of pride——"

"With what wretched sophistry have you deluded yourself!" interrupted the Baronet. "Was I not your seducer?—did I not inflict the most terrible wrong upon you which selfish man can possibly perpetrate towards confiding woman?"

"Aye—if we had always stood in the light of *seducer* and *victim*," said Nell Gibson, "it would have been different. *Then* I should have had a claim upon you, and would not have hesitated to assert it. But if *you* inflicted the first wrong upon *me*, I subsequently inflicted another upon *you*. I proved faithless to you when you loved me so well and cherished me so fondly: I deceived you most grossly—and there was something vile—yes, beyond all expression vile, in my conduct when I robbed and plundered you to expend the proceeds of my iniquity upon a paramour. Well then, instead of remaining your victim I became a wrong-doer towards you: and every claim that I might have possessed upon your consideration was forfeited. Yes—I felt all this; and again I tell you that I would sooner have died—aye, have perished miserably—than have received as the pittance of charity, that which once came from a noble bounty! Rather would I have sunk down through famine, than have obtained from your pity that which I once received from your fondest love! Besides, when I left you I was clothed in silk and satin—and no earthly consideration would have induced me reappear before you in the rags of beggary."

"But still," observed the Baronet, much moved by the language which thus poured with such undoubted sincerity from the young woman's lips—

"but still in the depths of your soul remained a certain fondness and affection for me: otherwise you would not have perilled your life to save mine last night."

"Listen to me," exclaimed Nell Gibson; "and I will unfold to you the maze and mysteries of a woman's heart—not merely of one woman, nor of my heart alone—but the feeling which is peculiar to us all! In the bosom of the vilest, most degraded, and most crime-stained of the unfortunate women whom the lust of man or the iron sway of poverty has flung upon the streets,—yes, in the bosom of even the foulest, lowest, and vilest prostitute, there is one small sanctuary in which an image is treasured up as the idol of a worship: and this is the image of the seducer! In retrospecting over years of crime, the unfortunate woman carries her recollections back to the period of her girlhood and her first virgin love. Even though it was the love which robbed her of that virginity and steeped her in disgrace, it is nevertheless the one bright spot in her chequered career. Yes—if we look back through a vista of rags, and filth, and poverty, and wretchedness, and crime, still do we behold at the beginning that bright and sunny period when hopes were golden and the heart gushed forth with all the freshest feelings of youth. Then is it that the image of the loved one—though perhaps no longer loved—is reproduced vividly to the memory: nor is he thought of as a mere seducer—no, nor is that past spring-tide of joy looked back upon as the very source whence all subsequent pollutions have flowed. Now, then, do you understand me? Since I fled from you I have received the embraces of many many men—I have been glad to sell myself for gold or for silver;—I have given myself up to suitors in moments of sensuality;—at other times, almost without passion and without impulse, I have abandoned myself to strangers through mere profligacy. And yet, though thus drinking the cup of vice to the very dregs, and dragging myself as it were through all kinds of moral filth and pollution, there has still always been one image that I have cherished in the sanctuary of my heart, and which no stains of vice nor shades of misery could possibly efface. That image is *yours*: and you are the only living being for whom I would have perilled my life last night, or would peril it again! Nay—had you been any other person, I should have seen you killed without pity and without remorse."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had listened in speechless amazement to this address, which the young woman delivered with an impressive seriousness that precluded all doubt as to her sincerity. Besides which, her actions at the hut had fully proven the existence of that sentiment with regard to her seducer which she now explained: and as with rapid glance the Baronet's mental vision swept over the past, he comprehended full well how such a state of feeling as that which she had described, could be.

Four years had elapsed since he had first encountered Ellen Gibson upon one of his estates in a distant county. Her parents were dead: she had no relatives, but was living with friends. Her education had been tolerably well cared for: indeed, she had been reared in a manner above her means or her expectations. The Baronet saw her and loved her: and she loved him in return. Marriage was not spoken of between a man of rank and wealth and a young girl of rustic parentage: but she became his mistress. He brought her to London—lodged her in a sumptuous mansion—gave her carriages, horses, servants—in fine, all the luxuries and elegancies of life. But she soon formed other connexions; and her profligacy, developing itself with remarkable suddenness, hurried her away with a sort of frenetic speed. Sir Douglas discovered her infidelity, and wrote to remonstrate—even offering her forgiveness: for he was infatuated with her at the time. But instead of answering his note, she sold off the entire contents of the mansion, the carriages, horses, even to his own plate which she had with her at the time: and taking her departure, she lavished the produce upon a paramour who had not a single quality, personal, mental, or social, that could compare with those of the Baronet. Since that period her career had been one of those rapid downward ones which furnish so many a history of female crime: and therefore seeing what she now was, and what she once had been, Sir Douglas Huntingdon could scarcely feel astonished if from the dark depths of her present position she occasionally cast wistful, longing, and even loving eyes backward upon that epoch which formed the brightest page in her life's history.

"But wherefore," he said, after a long pause, "should you go back to those dreadful men? Tell me—would you like to abandon the sort of existence you are now leading?"

"God knows I would!" returned the young woman, in a voice expressive of the deepest feeling. "But it is impossible—it is impossible!" she immediately added, shaking her head, while an expression of unutterable despair swept over her countenance.

"Why impossible?" demanded the Baronet, in amazement: "can you not to-morrow if you choose retire into some agreeable seclusion? What if I were to go early in the morning and take a nice respectable lodging for you——"

"Oh! no, no—it is impossible!" interrupted Nell Gibson, impatiently. "You are not aware—you cannot imagine how difficult it is to extricate one's self from the meshes of crime——"

"Do you mean to tell me," said the Baronet, contemplating the young woman in dismay,—"solemnly and seriously tell me, that you are so inveterately wedded to this shocking course of life——"

"My God! no—ten thousand times no!" interrupted Nell Gibson, a sort of agony sweeping over her features. "Have I not told you that I would abandon this wretched, wretched mode of life if I could? And, oh! words have no power to tell the deep, deep horror—the intense loathing—which I at times feel for such an existence. Ere now I spoke of my depravities, and I said that often when neither tempted by gold or prompted by passion, I flung myself into the embraces of the merest strangers. Well, perhaps if I had described my humour on such occasions as the recklessness of *despair*, instead of the wantonness of sheer *depravity*, I should have been nearer the mark. Yes—to drive away thought I must always have some kind of excitement. I hate brandy; but I drink it often and often—I feel that it hardens me. I am always ready to do anything wrong—aye, even to commit unnecessary or unprofit-

able crimes, sooner than do nothing: and for the same reason do I seek the excitement of all possible profligacies. By these means do I expel *thought*, and thus manage to maintain a calm and even happy exterior."

"But wherefore, I again ask," said the Baronet, "should you not abandon this course of life if you wish? Wherefore return to those horrible companions?"

"Because I am so utterly and completely in their power," answered the young woman. "Wherever I might hide myself, they would seek me out:—aye, even did I fly to the ends of the earth, they would pursue me—they would discover my retreat—they would murder me! When once a person gets deep in with such companionship, it is impossible to extricate one-self. No—it cannot be done. You see how completely I am in the power of those wretches, by coming here for these hundred guineas to propitiate them."

"Ah! and this reminds me to inquire," said the Baronet, "how you saved yourself from their fury, and what colouring you gave to the adventure."

"That man who enticed you back to the hut, was none other than the Public Executioner," replied Nell Gibson. "There—start not—speak not—what matters it now who he was? I tell you all this, of course being well aware that you will take no advantage of it. The woman who came with him is his mistress: and the lad is his apprentice. Sally Melmoth—that is the woman's name—has long had a spite against me, because she fancies I have been over intimate with her flash man. But no—not for the world! Base and profligate as I know I am, there is a lower depth even than the lowest to which I have sunk: and that is the arms of the public hangman. But to return to last night's affair. The Hangman and the apprentice prevented the infuriate woman from doing me a mischief: and while the Hangman himself burst open the door and rushed after you and the young girl, his mistress and the lad kept guard upon me. Presently the Hangman came back, after a fruitless search: and almost at the same time the other men returned from an equally unavailing hunt after you. They were all savage enough; and I thought that everything was over with me. So I prepared for the worst. The Hangman told the other men how you had sought refuge at the public-house in the bye lane—how you had innocently let slip the admission that you owed your life to me—and how he had enticed you back to the hut to be disposed of as the whole gang should think fit. The man that I am now living with—he who brought you down the writing paper and who is called the Buttoner—then declared that from the first moment he suspected I had given you such information, and this suspicion on his part had been confirmed by the circumstance that I had accidentally let out to that stout man whose name is Bencull, that you were a Baronet, this circumstance proving that I knew you before. All these statements and remarks were made in my presence; and ferocious looks glared upon me from every eye. I saw that nothing but the sudden exertion of all my presence of mind could save me; and I accordingly exclaimed, "*Well I confess that all you have said is true; but the man whose life I have this night saved, was my first love—indeed the only man I ever sincerely and truly did love. I knew it was vain and useless to beg his life at your hands; and therefore I gave him the whispered information which led him to flee. You may kill me if you like; but I would do so over again this moment, in spite of all consequences. That is however no reason why I should betray you in other things; and you know right well that I would not.*'—They were all much struck by these remarks, but more so by the boldness of my manner. I thereupon proceeded to assure them that you would not take any proceedings against them, for fear of compromising me. As a proof thereof, I offered to come to your house to-day and obtain from you these hundred guineas for them. These assurances satisfied the whole party, the Hangman's mistress alone excepted. Three of the men have now accompanied me as far as your door, and are waiting at this moment in the street. You see, therefore," added Nell Gibson, with that calmness which was her *outward* characteristic, "how true I spoke when I declared that it was impossible to escape from the trammels of crime and the meshes of such companionship."

Thus ended the colloquy between this young woman and her seducer. She received the hundred guineas for which she had called: but again did she emphatically decline any boon or gift for herself. The Baronet accompanied her as far as the front door of his house; and standing upon the threshold for a few minutes to look after her, he observed by the light of the lamps that she joined three men at the corner of the street.

"Women are strange creatures!" thought the Baronet to himself, as he retraced his way to his own cheerful fireside.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

MORE PLOTTING AND COUNTER PLOTTING.

The three men whom Nell Gibson thus joined, were the Buttoner, Bencull, and the Hangman: and passing rapidly away from the fashionable street where Sir Douglas Huntingdon lived, they plunged into a low district in the close vicinity. For be it observed that in London the back windows of the palaces of the rich often look upon the noisome dens where the poor—*their victims*—dwell.

Entering a vile public house, or boozing-ken, the three men and Nell Gibson proceeded to the taproom: and as there was no one else there at the time, they were enabled to converse at their ease.

"Now, Nell," said the Buttoner, as soon as an order had been given for some liquor. "what news? I suppose you succeeded with your pal, the Baronet."

"Here is the money," she observed, quietly producing gold and Bank-notes for a hundred guineas.

"And you couldn't get no more out of him?" observed Bencull, savagely.

"Not a farthing," answered Nell Gibson. "I had a great deal of difficulty in getting this."

"Then he was deuced ungrateful," said the Hangman, "after all you did for him last night."

"Yes—very," replied the young woman.

"And didn't you learn nothink about that sweet young gal," demanded Bencull.

"Only that Sir Douglas, on ascertaining who she was, restored her to her friends;"—and in giving this answer Nell Gibson was prompted by the same feeling which had inspired her conduct throughout towards the Baronet—namely, to do nothing that should in any way injure or annoy him, but on the contrary anything she could to serve him.

"Well, this *is* perwoking," exclaimed Bencull,—"to lose that young gal after all the trouble I had in getting possession of her! But there's one more question—and that is, whether there's any chance of a safe crack in the Baronet's house?"

"Eh! that's the question," said the Hangman, instinctively tapping his capacious pocket to show that he had his burglarious apparatus concealed about his person.

"I examined the hall well, as I went in and came out," said Nell Gibson; "but I don't think that an entry can be made in that quarter. In fact, I scarce think from what I saw that it would be worth while to attempt it at all."

"Now mind you, I think just the contrary," cried the Hangman, with an oath; for he had been watching Nell Gibson's countenance from under his overhanging brows, and he felt convinced in his own mind that she was doing all she could to shield the Baronet.

"I say let us try the crack," exclaimed the Buttoner, sharing the Hangman's suspicions.

"And I say," added Bencull, "that if I do it alone, it shall be done. There's a coach-house and stable adjoining the Baronet's mansion: and we can easy get through that way to the back of the premises. Then, when once at the back of a house, I should like to see the doors or windows that would keep me out."

"Well then, it's agreed," said the Hangman. "Let me see," he continued, looking at a great silver watch which he pulled from his fob: "it's now half-past ten o'clock. We will wait here till twelve—and that shall be the hour. The lush is good at this ken, and the landlord knows me."

"Will you stay here, then, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner; "or go home to Bermondsey and get to bed comfortable, while I stay to do the trick?"

"Just as you like," answered Nell, with apparent indifference: though in her heart she was most anxious to get away at once.

"Well then," said the Buttoner, also affecting the utmost carelessness in the matter, "I should think you had better get home as quick as you can."

"So be it," said Nell Gibson, rising from her seat; then, with a laugh, she observed to her paramour the Buttoner, "Mind in dividing that swag you remember my regulars:"—and she pointed to the money on the table.

"All right, Nell," said the Buttoner: and the young woman then took her departure.

"What did you let her go for?" demanded the Hangman, savagely, the moment the door closed behind her. "Curse me if I don't think she's been playing us false again with this Baronet——"

"That's just my opinion," interrupted the Buttoner, starting from his seat: "and it's cos why I think so that I persuaded her to be off so that I may have an opportunity of watching her. I shall be back at midnight at all events, if not sooner."

Having thus spoken, he turned up the collar of his coat, slouched his hat over his countenance, and then hastened from the boozing-ken. On emerging into the street, he caught a glimpse of Nell Gibson by the light of a lamp, just as she was turning round the corner: and having once got upon the right track, he had no difficulty in keeping her in view,—still leaving such a distance between them as to prevent her from perceiving that she was thus dogged. At first, however, she kept halting, turning round, looking and listening, every two or three minutes: but at length, being perfectly satisfied that there was no watch set upon her, she increased her pace, and made straight for the Almonry in Westminster, which was about a mile from the boozing-ken she had so recently left.

The Almonry is one of those dreadful neighbourhoods where pauperism is most intense, squalor most hideous, demoralization most depraved. It consists chiefly of brothels and such like dens of infamy, and forms part of the domain belonging as an endowment to Westminster Abbey! But inasmuch as loathsome hot-beds of vice and moral lazar-houses of that kind usually produce a good rent, the Dean and Chapter could not of course think of purging a neighbourhood which yielded them such large revenues.

In the midst of that morass so densely peopled with human reptiles, and exhaling so pestilential an atmosphere, was situated a low boozing-ken known as Meg Blowen's crib. It differed from Bencull's establishment in Jacob's Island, inasmuch as it had not the appearance of a private dwelling, but was open like any other public-house, and had a large room on the ground-floor always filled at night with the vilest of the vile and the lowest of the low.

To this place did Nell Gibson wend her way,—the Buttoner still following at a distance. Entering the establishment, she tarried for a few minutes in the public room to exchange some friendly observations with her acquaintances there: and having thus dispensed her courtesies to the leading members of the gang, she passed into Meg Blowen's—that is to say, the landlady's—private room behind the bar. If we follow her thither and peep in at her proceedings, we shall observe that she requested to be furnished with pen, ink, and paper; and having written a letter, she summoned into her presence a lad whom she believed to be the most trustworthy amongst the juvenile portion of reprobates there assembled. Making him secure about his person the letter which she had written, she bade him hasten and deliver it at an address which she named, and to depart from the house the moment he placed the letter in the hands of the servant answering the door. Having thus explicitly given her instructions, she placed five shillings in the lad's hands: and he set forth with great glee to execute his commission.

But to return to the Buttoner, we must observe that on seeing Nell Gibson enter Meg Blowen's he was more than ever convinced she had some artifice in view: and looking through the window, he first saw her converse with her acquaintances in the public room, and then pass into the private parlour behind the bar. He next saw Meg Blowen reach down the pen and ink from a shelf, take a sheet of paper out of a drawer, and then carry these writing materials into the parlour. It would have struck any individual even

far less astute than the Buttoner, that Nell Gibson was going to send a written communication somewhere: and he therefore remained intently upon the watch. In a few minutes he saw Nell Gibson appear at the door of the parlour, cast her eyes searchingly around upon the motley assemblage, and select one of the lads. The youth thus singled out was (as already stated) summoned by her into the parlour; and in a short time he reappeared. But instead of rejoining his companions at the table in the public room, he at once issued forth from the establishment.

The Buttoner followed him until they were at a convenient distance from the place: then looking back and perceiving the coast was clear, he overtook the boy, and clutching him by the collar, said, in a fierce tone, "Now, my lad, a word with you."

"Holloa! Mister Buttoner," exclaimed the youth, catching a glimpse of the man's countenance by the light gleaming from a window. "What do you mean by stopping me like this here?"

"Oh! you know me, do you, young feller?" cried the Buttoner. "Well, so much the better: we shall sooner come to an understanding. Now then, you have nothing to fear; because I shall let you keep whatever the young woman has just given you, and I will give you double myself into the bargain."

"Well, she gived me a guinea," said the boy, prompt with a lie and ready with a cheat.

"Wery good," observed the Buttoner. "Then of course you can show it me?"

"Won't you take a geneiman's word?" asked the lad impudently.

"No nonsense," responded the Buttoner, bestowing a hearty shake upon the youth. "Come, show us what Nell Gibson gave yer — and I'll double it."

"Well, by goles! it's turned into a crown," said

the boy, producing a five-shilling piece. "It's the reg'lar counterfeit crank she's come over me!"

"Nonsense," interrupted the Buttoner: then pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and counting out ten shillings, he said, "Now give me the letter you've got about you—walk about for half-an-hour or so—and go back and tell the young woman that you've done her commission quite faithful."

The ten shillings chinked in the boy's hand—the Buttoner grasped the letter—and they separated,—the latter returning to the boozing-ken where he had left the Hangman and Bencull. In a few hasty words he explained to them all that had occurred; and on opening the letter, which was addressed to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, the contents were found to be as follow:—

"Look well to your premises to-night. A burglary is contemplated by some of the men you saw at the hut on Shooter's Hill. I said all I could to prevent this further annoyance towards you; but I could not succeed in staving it off. I am very much afraid that they suspected I was playing a part; if so, all these causes of suspicion will make it go hard with me sooner or later. But no matter: whatever is to happen must take its course. I would have come back to warn you of the attempt that will be made; but I am so fearful that one of the men might go and watch the street. So I prefer writing, and have found a trusty messenger. I think the men will enter by the coach-house and get round to the back of the premises; but you must keep watch at all points. One thing however I conjure you—that is not to adopt any means to take them into custody, nor yet to do them any unnecessary hurt: only just to defend and protect yourself. This is most likely the last time you will ever hear of or from

"ELLEN."

The rage of the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, on reading this epistle, may be better conceived than described. Daniel Coffin muttered such awful threats against the young woman, that if his two companions had not been kindred fiends, their blood would have run cold. But when the first ebullition of their diabolical wrath was expended, they agreed after calmer and cooler deliberation, to conceal for the present their knowledge of this additional treachery on Nell Gibson's part, with a view to ascertain by some means or other whether she were also betraying them in respect to the plot initiated against Larry Sampson.

By the time this resolution was fairly discussed and adopted by the three villains, the Hangman's watch showed that it was midnight. They accordingly tossed off bumpers of brandy to drink success to their undertaking; and thus inspired with a more than natural amount of brute courage, they repaired in the direction of Sir Douglas Huntingdon's mansion.

Although the street where the house was situated was a fashionable one, it was no great thoroughfare; and by the aid of the Hangman's skeleton keys the coach-house door was soon opened. The three ruffians, having thus let themselves into this portion of the establishment, locked the door behind them, and then proceeded to light a "darkey," or lantern, which also formed part of the invariable tackle of a cracksman. In the rear of the coach-house were the stables, in which there were several horses; and there was a door behind, leading into a yard at the back of the house. The three burglars accordingly entered the stable for the purpose of passing through by the way described: but two of the horses exhibited such manifestations of terror by kicking and plunging, as if instinctively aware of the presence of intruders, that a groom who slept in a chamber above the coach-house was aroused from his repose.

Leaping from his bed, and arming himself with a pair of pistols, the groom sprang down the ladder leading to his chamber: but he was instantaneously seized by the three burglars, against whom he made a desperate resistance. The lantern was dashed out of the Hangman's hand, and the glass broken against the wall: it then fell upon a heap of straw, the light remaining unextinguished. The same blow which dashed the lantern from Coffin's hand knocked him violently down; and he lay half-stunned upon the floor for nearly a minute, during which Bencull and the Buttoner succeeded in overpowering the groom.

"Let's give him his gruel, Ben," cried the Buttoner, as they both dashed the unfortunate man with all their strength against the wall; so that he groaned heavily once, and then fell—lying motionless, either dead or else stunned beyond all hope of recovery.

But scarcely was this crime accomplished, when the sudden blazing of the straw on which the lantern had fallen, startled the burglars. From the Buttoner's lips burst the cry of "Fire!"—the Hangman, who had just recovered his senses, sprang as if galvanised to his feet;—and Bencull at once began to throw pails of water upon the burning material, there being a pump in the coach-house. But this endeavour to extinguish the flame speedily proving utterly ineffectual, the three burglars were compelled to depart as stealthily and promptly as they could.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not as yet retired to rest. The story which he had heard from the lips of his housekeeper relative to the troubles of Theodore and Ariadne Varian—together with the singular and touching features of his interview with Nell Gibson,—had furnished him with so much food for reflection that he remained sitting by his cheerful fireside, lost in serious meditation. All the rest of the household had retired to their chambers: a profound stillness reigned through the house; and not a sound reached his ears from without. But all on a sudden this dead, deep silence—this awe-inspiring solemnity of the midnight hour—was broken by that most terrible of all alarms, the cry of "Fire!"

Startled from his reflections as if by the voice of doom thundering in his ear, and springing from his seat as if stung by an adder, Sir Douglas Huntingdon rushed from the room and bounded forth to the front door to ascertain whether the alarm were real and where the fire was. In an instant he acquired the dreadful certainty that it was neither a cruel jest nor a false rumour: for the moment he opened the front door, the vivid light flashed upon his eyes, and he beheld the flames bursting forth from the windows of the rooms above the coach-house. Already, too, were crowds hurrying thither—the alarm was spreading to the neighbouring dwellings—and all the usual features of such a scene were manifesting themselves in their variety, confusion, and excitement.

Several persons sprang towards Sir Douglas—some proffering their advice—others demanding

how many people slept in his house, and in which rooms they were. In a moment he was overwhelmed with multitudinous questions and bewildered with conflicting counsels. Then came a couple of watchmen springing their rattles: next appeared three or four hulking fellows bearing along a ladder and knocking down all who got in their way—and all this while the crowd was collecting and the flames were bursting forth with increasing fury.

But Sir Douglas Huntingdon soon recovered his presence of mind: and rushing back into the house he raised the fearful alarm of *fire*, which did not appear as yet to have reached the ears of any inmate save himself. In a few moments all was bustle, confusion, and dismay within the walls of the mansion. Mrs. Baines came rushing down in her night-clothes; and overcome with terror, she fainted in the hall. Some of the other servants soon made their appearance also; and as the flames had now spread from the coach-house to the mansion itself, several active persons amongst the crowd began rapidly to remove all the most portable articles of furniture into the street. The ladder was raised against the front of the house in case of need, to facilitate escape from the upper storeys: and messengers were despatched for a fire-engine.

Meantime the Baronet, struck with horror at the idea that his groom slept over the coach-house, —and having satisfied himself that the other servants were all safe,—rushed to the back of the premises and opened the door leading from the yard to the stable. Several persons followed him: but the instant that stable-door was opened, two or three of the horses sprang madly forth, trampling down those who were in their way. Sir Douglas himself was thus much hurt by one of the affrighted animals: but rushing forward, he sought to penetrate into the stable. A volume of flame, bursting forth, drove him back;—and to his horror he heard the piteous sounds of dying agony which proved that several of his horses were perishing in the flames. But the groom—the poor unfortunate groom—where was he? Again did Sir Douglas spring forward in order to penetrate into the coach-house: but again did a volume of smoke drive him back. A third time did he make the attempt;—and now the ceiling of coach-house and stable fell in with a terrific crash; and if two of the men who had followed the Baronet hither had not suddenly pulled him back as they heard the rafters giving way, he would have been buried in the ruins.

For a few moments the flames seemed stifled in this part of the premises: but as a long tongue of fire suddenly shot up, lambent and lurid again, the Baronet observed by the light that the fall of the ceiling had brought down with it a considerable portion of the partition-wall separating the stabling department from the mansion itself. A large portion of the interior of the dwelling-house was thus revealed, including a back-staircase leading up to the bed-chambers.

At this moment the recollection flashed to the Baronet's mind that he had not ere now seen Ariadne Varian amongst the other inmates of the mansion whose safety was assured. Indeed, the poor girl had been forgotten: Mrs. Baines had swooned, as already stated, and had been borne to a neighbour's house where she fell into alarming hysterics: and, on the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon's attention had been mainly directed towards the coach-house and stabling. Thus was it that the only two persons who were likely to think of poor Ariadne, were prevented by circumstances from doing so, until the sudden laying bare of the private staircase to the view of the Baronet, led him to pass in rapid array in his mind every chamber to which that staircase led.

The instant that the image of Ariadne thus flashed to his recollection, he gave utterance to a cry of mingled anguish and despair: then springing forward, he clambered through the vast aperture which the falling in of the partition wall had caused; and he thus gained the interior of the dwelling-house. Passing into the hall, he found his servants and many strangers busy in removing the furniture. He made rapid inquiries concerning Ariadne; but the servants had forgotten her, and the strangers had seen no young damsel answering to her description descend the stairs.

Horrible uncertainty! All the upper part of the house was in a perfect conflagration: the street was as light as if it were daytime;—and one wretched engine was making the most ineffectual attempts to quench the fire. The ladder itself had caught the flames gushing forth from the upper windows. And here we may observe that the crowds augmented: and amongst them were the Hangman, Benoull, and the Buttoner, all three hovering about to see what piece of good luck the chapter of accidents might throw in their way.

From all that has been said, hurried and brief though the description be, the reader will understand that the flames had spread like wild-fire in an incredibly short space of time. Catching the chambers above the coach-house, they had thence burst into the mansion, all the upper part of which was now enveloped in a terrific blaze. To ascend therefore to the rooms above, appeared an act of frenzy or of desperation. But Ariadne's life was at stake: and this thought was sufficient to nerve the Baronet with the strength and courage of a thousand!

Retracing his way from the hall to the back staircase, he rushed up it. It was the same as a besieger scaling the walls of a town, while all kinds of igneous missiles and combustibles are showered down upon him. Sir Douglas had literally to ascend through gushing flames and volumes of smoke,—flames that scorched and smoke that blinded: but he was resolved to rescue Ariadne, or perish in the attempt! In a few seconds he reached her chamber-door. Bursting it open, he beheld her lying senseless on the carpet. Through the wainscotted wall the flames were already gushing: the heat was intense—the smoke stifling. In less than a minute the maiden would have been suffocated—whereas she was as yet unscathed by the fire, and had most probably fainted through terror when endeavouring to escape from her room on the first alarm of fire.

To snatch her up in his arms and bear her forth, was the work of a moment. Her head drooped back upon the Baronet's shoulder; and she continued senseless as he rushed with her down the staircase. Rushed indeed!—it was plunging as it were into a fiery furnace: and rapid as the lightning-flash did the thought sweep through the Baronet's mind that it would be a miracle if he and his fair burden reached the street in safety. Vast

masses of the partition wall kept falling in; and it seemed as if the whole building were about to give way and bury himself and Ariadne in the smoking, burning ruins. Great pieces of timber—especially rude planks belonging to the lofts above the stables—came crashing down: and thus, in the space of three or four short minutes, did the Baronet and the unconscious Ariadne pass through countless perils of an appalling character. But at length the damsel's brave deliverer reached the foot of the staircase: and as he rushed with his burthen through the hall and appeared with her at the street door, a tremendous shout of applause arose from the assembled multitudes.

At the very instant that Sir Douglas Huntingdon thus reached the threshold of the mansion with the still inanimate Ariadne in his arms, and in the strong glare of the terrific conflagration, the maiden was recognised by Bencull. This discovery of *the fair stranger of the hut* was in a moment communicated by the ruffian in a hurried whisper to the Buttoner and the Hangman: and they all three instinctively pressed forward towards the front-door steps. At that very instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon felt a sudden faintness come over him,—doubtless in consequence of the tremendous excitement as well as painful exertions through which he had just passed.

"Who will take care of this young lady?" he cried, as one of his footmen threw an ample cloak over the half-naked form of Ariadne.

But scarcely were the words spoken by the Baronet, when some large portion of the interior of the mansion fell in with such a terrific crash that the crowd retreated in sudden dismay and with cries of alarm: while those who were removing the furniture, rushed out of the house with such haste that the Baronet was thrown violently forward. In that moment of confusion, Bencull caught Ariadne Varian in his arms: and as if it were written in the book of destiny that circumstances were to favour the ruffian's designs in carrying off the still inanimate maiden, the whole roof of the house fell in at the very instant that he seized upon her. The consequence was that the fire was extinguished, or rather smothered, for the moment as completely as if a deluge of water were poured upon it: and darkness fell upon the scene—a darkness all the more intense through succeeding the glare of the conflagration. Confusion became worse confounded amongst the crowd: and while the whole living mass fell back from the vicinage of the falling house, as the sea sweeps away from the shore upon which it has just dashed its boiling billows, it was no difficult matter for Bencull to hurry away with Ariadne in his arms. The Hangman and the Buttoner kept close at his heels—an empty hackney-coach was encountered at the corner of the street—and the three villains entered it with their lovely burden.

But when the driver asked whither he was to go, the men were thrown into a sudden perplexity. Bencull, however, hastily whispered, "Didn't Nell Gibson talk of a certain Marquis of Leveson who was Mrs. Gale's best customer?"

"To be sure," whispered the Buttoner. "Why not take her direct to him?"

"Ah! do you think of selling her to that Marquis?" said the Hangman. "Well, I know where he lives—I have been in his house:"—then turning to the coachman who stood at the door, and thrusting some silver into his hand, Daniel Coffin ordered him to drive to Albemarle Street.

In a few minutes the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House: and it happened that just at the same moment Brockman, the favourite valet of the Marquis, was entering the mansion. Seeing the hackney coach stop, he inquired of those inside what their business was: and as it was pitch dark within the vehicle, the valet did not observe how villanous were the countenances of the fellows whom he thus addressed.

"The fact is," said the Hangman in a rapid whisper, "we have got a young gal that is intended for his lordship. She's in a fit: and so you can just lift her into the house without fearing any noise—and one of us will call for the recompense the first thing to-morrow morning."

Brockman naturally concluded from this statement that the fellows had been hired by his master, or else by some one in his lordship's interest, to perform this particular service: and he therefore at once consented to receive the maiden without asking another question. The housekeeper who was sitting up for Brockman, was summoned: and with her aid the valet lifted Ariadne out of the coach and carried her into the mansion.

The vehicle then drove away, the three ruffians congratulating themselves not only on having done something to annoy Sir Douglas Huntingdon, whom they regarded as a sort of enemy, but likewise on having adopted so bold a step as to convey the damsel direct to the spot where her charms were marketable, instead of conducting the bargain through the medium of a middle-woman, such as Mrs. Gale. But not for a moment did those ruffians experience the slightest remorse for having caused so terrible a conflagration in that house beneath the ruins of which the charred and blackened remains of the unfortunate groom were indubitably buried.

Meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had been thrown down and stunned by the rush of people from the front door of his mansion, was borne to a neighbour's house, where immediate restoratives were applied. On coming to himself his first inquiry was for Ariadne: but those by whom he was surrounded, could give him no information on the subject. Supposing that she had been taken to some other house in the vicinage, he sallied forth into the street again to make further inquiries on the subject. But neither from his own servants, who were watching over the property removed out of the house—nor from any of the crowd—could he obtain a satisfactory answer. In fact, no tidings could he glean of Ariadne from the moment that he sank down insensible in front of his own door.

Tortured with cruel misgivings, he sped from house to house prosecuting his inquiries, up and down the street—but all in vain. At length he was compelled, through sheer exhaustion, to abandon any farther research for the present, and retire to a neighbouring hotel where he took up his temporary quarters.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER LAMB IN THE LION'S DEN.

On recovering her senses, Ariadne Varian found herself in bed; and sweeping her eyes rapidly around, as a flood of recollections poured in unto her brain, she at once saw that it was not the same chamber which she had occupied at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Handsome as that chamber was, this was far more elegantly furnished, and denoted a more exquisite refinement in taste, or rather in luxury.

A middle-aged woman, looking like a housekeeper, was seated by the bedside: and though the instant Ariadne opened her eyes, this female endeavoured to look kindly and speak soothingly, yet it was not with the same motherly tenderness evinced by Mrs. Baines.

No suspicion of treachery, however, entered Ariadne's mind. Collecting her ideas, she remembered that she had been alarmed with cries of "Fire"—that springing from her couch she had beheld the ominous glare at the window of her chamber—and that the noise of the gathering crowds in the streets had reached her ears. She also recollected that, overcome with terror, she had felt her limbs failing and her strength abandoning her: and as she remembered nothing more until the instant she awoke in this strange apartment where she now found herself, she naturally concluded that her reminescences had been interrupted by a long swoon.

Utterly unaware, therefore, how her life was saved, and who had saved it,—unconscious, indeed of every feature and detail of the terrible conflagration,—her first hurried questions were to inquire where she was, what extent of damage had been done, and whether any lives were lost. Then before even a single one of these queries was answered, she exclaimed with looks and accents of torturing suspense, "Tell me, is Sir Douglas Huntingdon safe?"

The questions so hurriedly and excitedly put were each and all equally puzzling to the Marquis of Leveson's housekeeper, who was even more ignorant than Ariadne herself relative to what had occurred—seeing that she of course did not know who the damsel was, whence she had been brought, or that any particular house had been on fire. Being however of an astute and cunning disposition, as the housekeeper of such a nobleman ought to be, the woman gave Ariadne such vague and general, but at the same time reassuring answers, that while she tranquillized the maiden's mind on the one hand, she elicited on the other fresh questions which in themselves were explanations of what had occurred.

"You assure me, then, that my kind-hearted benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, is safe?" said Ariadne.

"Yes—quite safe."

"Is the house totally consumed? and am I indebted to a neighbour's hospitality for this asylum?"

"I am afraid the damage is great—and you are freely welcome here."

"Was it the Baronet who saved me?" inquired Ariadne, secretly wishing in her heart that the response would be in the affirmative.

"Yes—he rescued you. You were senseless, I suppose?"

"I had fainted through terror the moment I heard the alarm of fire."

"Ah! poor young lady, and enough too to frighten you! I presume you are some relation to Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"Not the least," returned Ariadne. "He is my benefactor—that is to say, he has behaved handsomely, kindly, and nobly towards me, although I have only known him for I may say a few hours—indeed since last night. But this reminds me that his excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, has behaved like a mother to me: do you know whether she is quite safe?"

"I have already told you," answered Lord Leveson's housekeeper, "that no lives have been lost."

"Is Mrs. Baines here in this house?"

"No—but at a neighbour's."

"Ah! I understand," said Ariadne: "when so dreadful an occurrence as a fire takes place, in a house, the inmates speedily become dispersed throughout the neighbourhood."

"Yes—that is always the case."

"And now tell me beneath whose roof I have found an asylum?" asked Ariadne.

"Have you ever heard of a nobleman named Leveson—the Marquis of Leveson?" inquired the housekeeper, with becoming caution.

"No, never—Oh! yes—I answered too hastily," said Ariadne, suddenly correcting herself, as she remembered having read that the Mr. Dysart who was hung a short time back was the husband of the Marquis of Leveson's niece. "I have heard his lordship's name mentioned, now that I think of it—but quite in a casual manner!"

"Well, then, should you be pleased or otherwise," asked the housekeeper, "if you heard that you were beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson?"

"I should esteem myself highly honoured," returned Ariadne, with that simplicity of prejudice in favour of the aristocracy which was natural with one who had never been taught either by lessons or by experience, to loath, hate, and abominate that aristocracy as the greatest curse that God in his wrath or Satan in his malignity ever inflicted upon a country.

"Well, then," said the housekeeper, "this is the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson: and I occupy an important post in his lordship's household. His lordship is an excellent man, and I am sure that you will like him amazingly when you come to know him. Besides which, he is certain to feel a great interest in you after your adventure of this night. And then, too, there is his beautiful niece Lady Ernestina Dysart—one of the handsomest and finest women in England. Ah! how unfortunate she has been," added the housekeeper, shaking her head with much apparent solemnity.

"Yes, I know to what you allude," said Ariadne, with a profound sigh, as the thought of Dysart's fate, by a natural association, conjured up ideas of Newgate, and forcibly reminded her of her brother Theodore's recent misfortunes. "It was when reading certain circumstances in the newspaper that I first became acquainted with the name of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Well, my dear young lady," said the housekeeper, "I need not tell you that it was a sad and shocking blow for his lordship and his lordship's niece. But I see that I must not chatter in this way to you any longer. Pray compose yourself to rest. I will leave a light in your room: and on this table by your bedside you will find cordials, restoratives, and various kinds of refreshment, should you feel exhausted or faint. I will visit you early in the morning, and hope to learn that you have slept off the effects of the alarm and nervousness produced by the fire."

The housekeeper then withdrew: and Ariadne speedily sank into a profound slumber, little suspecting into what a maze of perils she had been so perfidiously betrayed.

The first thing in the morning Brockman acquainted the Marquis with the arrival of a young lady in the middle of the night: and as the valet had been conversing with the housekeeper only a few minutes before he repaired to his master's chamber, he had gleaned from her lips all that she herself had gleaned from Ariadne's. The Marquis of Leveson was unfeignedly astonished when he heard of this arrival: and Brockman saw at once that his master had really *not* expected any such occurrence.

But while they were still deliberating upon the event, and the valet was explaining to the Marquis how the fair stranger had spoken of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the fire which had occurred at his house, a footman knocked at the door to announce that a man, who declined giving his name, solicited an immediate audience of his lordship. That this was one of the men who had brought the fair stranger to the mansion during the night, was presumable: and the Marquis, anxious to learn more of the matter, at once proceeded to the room where the individual was waiting.

The visitor was none other than the Hangman, dressed out in his very best apparel: but his ill-favoured countenance and sinister look were not much improved by the advantages of a Sunday garb. However, the Marquis did not expect to encounter an elegant gentleman in the individual who had brought the fair stranger to his house: but at the same time he little suspected that the ruffian who now stood in his presence was the Public Executioner—the man who had been admitted into the joint confidence of his niece Ernestina and the Prince Regent relative to the affair of the deceased Paul Dysart!

"Well, and what is your business?" inquired the nobleman.

"I called about the young girl that me and a couple of pals of mine left here last night," said the Hangman, with the most brazen effrontery.

"And pray," demanded the Marquis, assuming a stern look,—"what made you bring that young female hither?"

"You see, my lord," replied Daniel Coffin, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house was burnt to the ground during the past night. Me and my pals happened to be mingling quite promiscuous in the crowd that the fire collected; and, lo and behold! the Baronet brought down a young lady in his arms, half naked and in a fainting state. So, seeing that she was beautiful as an angel, we got possession of her—whipped her into a coach—and brought her here——"

"But why did you bring her hither?" demanded the Marquis: "that is the point I want you to clear up."

"Oh! there's no gammon about me, my lord," exclaimed Coffin. "The fact is, I've been in those secret chambers of your lordship's, and have looked at all the pretty things in the shape of statues and paintings——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the nobleman, the truth flashing to his comprehension: "then you are——"

"Dan'el Coffin, at your lordship's service," was the reply. "If your lordship wants references," added the fellow, with cool self-sufficiency, "I can give 'em either to Lady Ernestina or the Prince Regent."

"Well, I know now who you are and all about you," said the Marquis, scarcely able to conceal the sensation of utter loathing which he experienced as he gazed upon the public executioner. "In plain terms, then, you fancied that in consequence of having seen my private apartments, you would not be doing wrong in bringing the young girl to me?"

"That's just what it is, my lord," answered the Hangman.

"But do you know who she is?" inquired the Marquis: "what is her station in life?—is she the mistress of Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a relative—or a servant? In fact, tell me all about her."

"She's not a servant, but looks like a very genteel young person—almost a lady, I should say. But one thing is very certain—she's *not* the Baronet's mistress: for I happen to know that she hasn't even known him many hours."

"But a few minutes are enough to ruin a woman's virtue—let alone a few hours," said the Marquis. "However, that is of little consequence, since the girl is really beautiful. And now after all you have said, do you mean me to understand that you are not well acquainted with her? Of course you are! What is her name?"

"I can't tell your lordship—I know no more than Adam," was the reply. "The fact is, in a few words, me and my pals were at Shooter's Hill on a little business the night before last; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was travelling that way, fell into our hands. Within the same hour, another accident also threw this young lady in our way: and to be brief, they both succeeded in effecting their escape and getting off together. So it was natural that the Baronet should give the young girl an asylum: and that's the way she came to be at his house. But hasn't your lordship seen her yet?"

"Not yet. I am however told that she is really very beautiful," observed the Marquis.

"Beautiful!" cried the Hangman, with a diabolical leer: "she's so sweetly pretty that if I hadn't thought your lordship would give a good price for her, I should have kept her for myself. I don't know much of these matters; but I must say that you need only look in her face to see that she's innocence itself."

"Well, and so now you are come for your reward?" said the Marquis. "What do you expect?"

"Fifty guineas won't hurt your lordship," answered the Hangman.

"There—take that," said the Marquis, throwing down his purse, which he knew contained more than the sum demanded.

Daniel Coffin picked up the purse from the table where the nobleman had tossed it, and then took his departure, well pleased with the success of his visit.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

A CATASTROPHE.

THE chamber to which Ariadne Varian had been consigned at Leveson House, was the one that communicated with the dressing-room whence a secret-door opened into the private suite of apartments already so often referred to in our narrative. This bed-chamber was sometimes occupied by the Marquis himself; but he as frequently slept in a room on a higher storey, for the sake of the convenience offered by contiguous baths. Thus, on the particular occasion now referred to, the nobleman had spent the night in this last-mentioned chamber: and therefore was it that the housekeeper, with fiendish forethought, consigned Ariadne to the one whence the communication led to the private suite of apartments.

On awaking after some hours of refreshing sleep, Ariadne recalled to mind everything that had occurred during the past night: but still it was without the slightest misgiving or suspicion she remembered that she was now beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson.

While she was thus collecting her ideas, the housekeeper entered the room, bearing a tray, containing the young maiden's breakfast.

"Is it very late?" inquired Ariadne, fancying that she must have slept a long time.

"It is a little past ten o'clock," replied the housekeeper: "but you will do well to take your breakfast in bed as you have passed through so much excitement and alarm during the past night. Moreover, you have no apparel of any kind here—and I must see about getting some clothes presently. His lordship will come and pay you a visit immediately, and will then confer with you on your plans and prospects."

"What, here!" ejaculated Ariadne, surprised at the remark and conceiving that she had not properly understood it.

"And why not?" asked the housekeeper, with a smile. "The Marquis is old enough to be your father: indeed you are a mere child to him. Moreover, I am going to remain here with you, my love!"

Still Ariadne experienced a secret displeasure at the idea of a stranger visiting her bed-room. Her pure-mindedness and natural delicacy shrank from the thought: but she scarcely dared to venture any farther remonstrance, as she felt that she was under great obligations to those who had given her an asylum beneath that roof. Besides which, as she had no garments to put on—not a stitch nor rag in the whole world beyond the night-drapery that she wore—she could not rise and dress herself to receive the Marquis; and it was natural that he should wish to know whom he had beneath his roof. But this reflection suddenly gave rise to another: namely, what account could she render of herself?—what name should she pass by? To refuse all replies to the questions that might be put, would seem not only suspicious but rude to a degree: and yet, on the other hand, how could she tell the truth?—how announce the name of Ariadne Varian? Ah! the poor girl was indeed unused to the arts of deceit and unskilled in the ways of duplicity!

She was sitting up in bed, pondering mournfully upon these points, and partaking of some chocolate which the housekeeper had poured out for her, when a gentle knock was heard at the door. The housekeeper at once opened it; and the Marquis entered the room. Ariadne instinctively shrank beneath the bed-clothes, while her cheeks were suffused with blushes.

"How is the fair guest with whose presence circumstances have thus honoured me?" said the Marquis, assuming his softest voice and blandest manner. "Really the incidents which have thus brought you, young lady, within these walls are so romantic, that they invest you with additional charms."

Ariadne said nothing: she was overwhelmed with confusion. But averting her blushing countenance, she felt such strange sensations come over her—sensations of mingled alarm, outraged modesty, and bitter annoyance—that she was ready to burst into tears.

"You are welcome to my house, young lady," resumed the Marquis,—"most welcome! Indeed the longer you grace it with your presence, the happier I shall feel. My excellent housekeeper here will see that your slightest wants shall not merely be attended to, but even anticipated——"

"I thank your lordship," murmured Ariadne, now recovering the power of utterance: "but I shall not intrude on your lordship's hospitality much longer. Indeed if your lordship's housekeeper will only be kind enough to furnish me with apparel, I shall at once prepare to take my departure," she added, her sense of violated decency now triumphing over her fears and imparting firmness to her tone.

"Well, well, my dear young lady—you are your own mistress, no doubt," said the Marquis, believing Ariadne's conduct to be nothing more nor less than mere affectation: for he could not fancy that it was possible for her to have passed even a few short hours in the dwelling of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and have come forth pure and chaste. "But methinks that this precipitation on your part to leave my mansion, where there is every disposition to treat you kindly——"

"My lord," interrupted Ariadne, now turning her eyes towards the Marquis while her countenance was flushed with indignation: "I know not what may be the manners and customs of fashionable life; but in the sphere to which I belong, your presence in my chamber would not only be deemed a violation of all the rules of hospitality, but a positive outrage and insult."

"Upon my honour, you take my conduct most unkindly!" exclaimed the Marquis. "But I will withdraw for the present, since you appear to wish it."

He then quitted the room, making a rapid sign to the housekeeper: and the moment the door closed behind him, Ariadne burst into a flood of tears.

"My dear girl, don't take on like this," said the housekeeper. "Why, I am really surprised at you! His lordship did not mean any offence—how could he? He perhaps spoke in rather an off-hand manner: but then that was his familiarity of tone towards one in whom he felt interested. I can assure you

that the Marquis is generosity and liberality personified. If you asked him for any boon on which you set your mind, you would have it. And young ladies *have* their little whims and caprices, you know——"

"Good heavens! what means this strange language?" cried Ariadne, all the suspicions and misgivings which within the last few minutes had been aroused in her mind, now becoming excited to a painful degree. "If you really wish to befriend me——"

"What can I do, young lady? Speak!"

"Procure me some apparel. I cannot offer to recompense you at this moment: but in the course of the day—when once I shall have seen Sir Douglas Huntingdon——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the housekeeper, now perfectly convinced in her own mind that Ariadne was the Baronet's mistress. "But wherefore should you be in such haste to quit this mansion? Do you desire to return to that Sir Douglas Huntingdon of whom you have spoken?"

"I do—he is my only friend!" exclaimed Ariadne, with passionate vehemence, and not reflecting for a moment what interpretation might be put upon the manner in which she spoke of the Baronet. "But will you—will you, my good woman, procure me some fitting apparel? Surely Lady Ernestina Dysart would take compassion upon me—or one of the female servants might lend me a gown—a shawl—a bonnet—in fine, the barest necessaries ——"

"To be sure, my dear girl," said the housekeeper: "I will procure all you want in good time."

"At once!" cried Ariadne, springing from the couch. "Procure me some raiment—I will dress myself with all possible haste——and will then intrude no longer ——"

"Ah! you are wrong to speak of intrusion," interrupted the housekeeper. "But come into this dressing-room: here are all the requisites of the toilette—and I will soon procure you fitting apparel."

"Oh! then I shall thank you indeed!" exclaimed Ariadne, somewhat tranquillised by this assurance.

But while she was combing out her beautiful long flaxen hair in the dressing-room adjoining the bed-chamber, the housekeeper took advantage of a moment when the maiden's back was turned, to touch the secret spring and open the door leading into the suite of private apartments.

"I asked you just now whether you really wished to return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," resumed the wily woman: "and you declared that such was your desire."

"He is my benefactor—I have already told you as much," said Ariadne. "I am under obligations to him—deep obligations," she repeated with a profound sigh, as she thought of her brother to whom the Baronet had despatched his valet James with reassuring messages and with money.

"You are wrong, young lady—you are wrong," continued the housekeeper, "to think of returning to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, when you may be so much happier at the house of the Marquis of Leveson. Behold, my dear girl—behold this splendidly furnished apartment into which the dressing-room opens," she exclaimed, drawing back the secret door. "All these rooms that you see shall be your's—with domestics to wait upon you—if you will only consent to remain here! Ah! my dear young lady, I am sure I shall not supplicate in vain!"

The amazement produced by these words overwhelmed as it were the alarm previously excited: and Ariadne, desisting for a moment from the operation of combing out her hair, turned upon the woman a look so full of wonder and startled inquiry, that it even expressed her feelings more eloquently than the words to which she simultaneously gave utterance.

"Wherefore should you invite me thus to remain within these walls?—wherefore should you offer me the inducement of these elegant rooms? Indeed, what know you of me, that such a proposal should have emanated from your lips?"

"Ah! young lady," said the housekeeper, adopting a tone of gentle persuasion, "did you not observe that the Marquis surveyed you with admiration! And surely, surely you will not be so cruel as to treat him with indifference or scorn?"

"Good heavens! what words are these that I hear!" exclaimed Ariadne, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions upon her cheeks. "It is impossible that this can be the house of the Marquis of Leveson!—impossible that any nobleman would have intruded into the chamber which his hospitality had afforded to a young and friendless girl!—impossible that any female in his service would dare to address me in the language which has just fallen from your lips!"

"Now, if it comes to the matter of that," exclaimed the housekeeper, suddenly throwing off the mask and speaking in a tone of coarse insolence, "I don't see why you should pretend to be so very particular. Come, come, young woman—here's enough of this nonsense: and I have already adopted the coaxing tone too long. I suppose you meant to sell yourself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, even if you have not done it already. But let me tell you that the Marquis of Leveson will prove more profitable to you. I saw just now by his lordship's words that he does not regard you as the stubbornest of prudes, or yet as a dragon of virtue; and I know his humour well enough to feel assured that he won't waste much time in coming to the point with you. Indeed he has only retired for a few minutes, just to give me the opportunity of being explicit with you."

A mortal paleness gradually spread itself over Ariadne's countenance, as these words smote upon her ears, carrying as it were the blight of a pestilence down into her very soul: and staggering towards a seat, she sank upon it crushed and overwhelmed by a terrible consternation. A faintness seized upon her—a film spread rapidly over her eyes—and she felt that her senses were abandoning her,—when the sudden sound of a door opening and shutting recalled her to herself. Startled back as it were into complete consciousness, she threw her affrighted looks around, and perceived that she was now alone. The housekeeper had left her—and it was the sound of the outer door of the bedchamber that she had heard opening and closing so abruptly. But that door almost immediately opened again: and now it was the Marquis of Leveson who re-appeared.

A scream of terror burst from the lips of Ariadne: and not only did alarm, but also a feel-

ing of outrage, modesty prompt her to fly from his presence: for be it understood that she was in a state of semi-nudity, having on nothing but the night-gear which left her neck and bosom all exposed. As she turned thus abruptly away from the approaching Marquis, she beheld the door which the housekeeper had left open when she displayed the handsomely-furnished apartment to which it led.

"Beautiful girl!" exclaimed the Marquis, catching sight of her naked charms and instantaneously inflamed by the view. "Resistance is vain!—besides, wherefore prove so coy—so cruel——"

But Ariadne had rushed forward into the apartment to which the secret door opened: and as she shut it promptly behind her, she turned round in eager search for the lock, that she might secure herself against the Marquis. But what was her surprise when she beheld nothing but the uniform and unbroken surface of the handsomely papered wall,—no lock—no handle—not even so much as a keyhole, to indicate the presence of a door! The thought flashed to her mind that she had fallen into some new snare: and overcome with a sense of terror now wrought up to an excruciating pitch, she sank down into one of the splendid arm-chairs with which the apartment was furnished. But at the same instant did another rending scream burst from her lips, as the sharp click of the perfidious mechanism fell upon her ears, and as her arms and shoulders were clapsed by the springs that started forth from the chairs!

At the same time the invisible door by which she had entered that room, was opened—and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance. Instantaneously shutting the door behind him, he stood feasting his eyes upon the charms of his intended victim. But, Oh! his hard heart melted not with pity as that sweet countenance was upturned with an expression so earnestly imploring,

so pathetically entreating towards his own: no pity nor remorse had he for that damsel's sake;—all his ideas, all his aspirations were concentrated in the burning heat of one absorbing passion!

"My lord, my lord," murmured Ariadne, "have mercy upon me!"

But as the maiden uttered these words in a dying tone, her heard drooped forward—the gaspings of her breath ceased—and the palpitations of her snowy bosom were no longer perceptible.

"She has fainted," said the Marquis to himself. "But she is not the first who——"

The nobleman's reflection was suddenly cut short by a mortal alarm which seized upon him: for as he stooped down and looked at Ariadne, it suddenly struck him that she was dead!

He hastily placed his hand upon her heart: but it beat not;—and the bosom which his hand thus pressed in its nudity, was as still as if death were indeed there. With a cold shudder running through his entire form, he touched the secret spring which released her from the grasp of the mechanism: and lifting her in his arms he bore her back into the bed-chamber and laid her upon the couch. Still did she continue senseless: and if that were not the sleep of death, then assuredly was it a swoon of a most alarming character.

Vainly did the Marquis sprinkle her countenance with water and apply a scent-bottle to her nostrils. She moved not—her heart was still—her pulse imperceptible;—and all vital colouring was disappearing from her lips. Her nails—those beautifully shaped nails, so pellucid with their roseate tint a few moments before—now were becoming of a bluish appearance: and this circumstance gave a still deeper shock to the soul of the Marquis, for he regarded it as the unmistakable sign of death!

He rang the bell—and the housekeeper answered the summons. Nothing could equal the woman's dismay on beholding Ariadne thus stretched lifeless on the couch; and the Marquis saw by the sudden horror which seized upon her what she also thought—his worst fears being then confirmed, that the maiden was indeed dead!

Almost wild with alarm, he bade the housekeeper hasten and fetch Lady Ernestina thither; and in a minute or two the woman returned accompanied by his lordship's niece. But Ernestina at once declared that all human aid was unavailing, and that the damsel was no more!

Nothing could exceed the excruciation of alarm which now reigned in that chamber. What was to be done?—how dispose of the corpse?—how account for the presence of the young female in the house at all? The Marquis paced to and fro in the chamber like a madman: the housekeeper fell upon her knees by the side of the bed, and began giving way to the bitterest lamentations;—while Lady Ernestina, conquering her emotions somewhat in the presence of the awful dilemma, stood gazing upon the beautiful face of the dead, revolving in her mind a thousand different schemes for the disposal of the corpse.

"Good heavens! what a calamity—what an awful calamity!" exclaimed the Marquis, wringing his hands at one moment, and then gesticulating with them frantically the next.

"Oh! it is enough to hang us all," groaned the housekeeper. "What on earth will become of us?"

"Calm yourselves, calm yourselves—I beseech you!" said Ernestina. "It is only by extreme prudence, circumspection, and caution that we shall avoid discovery—that is to say, if the occurrence *must* be concealed. But why not let it be avowed? The girl was not murdered—at least not murdered in the positive meaning of the term——"

"But there must be a coroner's inquest, and all the annoyances and dangers of an inquiry!" said the Marquis. "How am I to account for the girl being here?—under what circumstances am I to say she died? If recognised and identified as the one who was rescued last night from the fire at Huntingdon's house, how came she here? Wherefore was she brought to such a distance, instead of being taken to some dwelling close at hand?. Ah! the case is fraught wth terrible suspicion, Ernestina—you must see that it is!"

"Oh! yes," said the housekeeper, with bitter lamentations: "it must be hushed up—it must be hushed up!"

"Then do you know what is to be done," said Ernestina, a sudden idea striking her. "You must send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon—tell him all that has happened—and throw yourself upon his mercy. There is nothing else to be done."

"But if this girl was his mistress," exclaimed the Marquis, "he might seek a cruel revenge. And yet it is hardly possible that he can care anything for her, seeing that their acquaintance has only been of a few hours——Yes, yes," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "your advice must be adopted, Ernestina. Huntingdon would not ruin an old friend!"

"Besides," observed the nobleman's niece, "you will ascertain who the young girl was, and whether there will be much inquiry made by relatives or by friends into the circumstances of her death."

"Be it then as you say," observed the Marquis. "And now, Ernestina, for God's sake take this distracted woman away with you, and endeavour to console her—or at all events to make her hold her peace—while I send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

Lady Ernestina accordingly persuaded the housekeeper to accompany her away from the chamber of death; and the Marquis, quitting the room also, and locking the door behind him, hastened to make a confidant of his valet Brockman, whom he despatched forthwith in search of the Baronet. In about half-an-hour Brockman returned accompanied by Sir Douglas, whom he had found at an hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of his own ruined mansion: and as the valet had not given the Baronet the least intimation of wherefore his presence was required in Albemarle-street, he was naturally much surprised at being thus peremptorily summoned thither. At first, indeed, he had refused to yield to Brockman's request, fancying that some treacherous or spiteful trick might be meditated against him in revenge for the part he had played in rescuing Louisa Stanley from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. But perceiving, by Brockman's manner, that the affair was urgent, although the valet declined entering into explanatory particulars, Sir

Douglas ultimately agreed to accompany him to Leveson House.

On arriving there, the Baronet was at once conducted into an apartment where he found the Marquis alone, but pacing to and fro in a state of dreadful excitement and agitation.

"Good heavens, Leveson," he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"Tell me, Huntingdon—tell me, before I speak a word to the point," said the Marquis of Leveson, advancing hurriedly, and seizing the Baronet by the hand,—"tell me whether there is any ill feeling on your part towards me?"

"Not a whit!" cried Sir Douglas: "on the contrary, I was fearful that you would break off your friendship with me on account of my intrusion upon your proceedings at so critical a moment the day before yesterday. But, my dear Leveson, as you called at Stratton Street and saw Miss Bathurst on that morning, you are of course acquainted with the entire mystery relative——"

"Ah! my dear Huntingdon, all the Miss Bathursts, and Clara Stanleys, and Venetias in the world are at this moment nothing to me," interrupted the Marquis: "for you see before you one of the most miserable of men——"

"Indeed! I do observe that you are pale and agitated—very pale," cried the Baronet. "But what is the matter? Is there anything I can do for you? Though having troubles enough of my own at this moment—what with the burning down of my house—the loss of a young lady in whom I had suddenly conceived the deepest interest——"

"Oh! now, *now* I am more wretched than ever!" exclaimed the Marquis. "Huntingdon—my honour, almost my life, is in your hands——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" cried the Baronet, nearly as much stunned as he was bewildered.

"Will you swear to screen me—swear to hold me harmless—swear not to betray me——"

"Yes, yes—I will swear anything, if you only relieve me from this torturing suspense."

"Know, then, that the young lady whom you have lost——"

"Good God! has she fallen into your hands?"

"Yes—but I knew not——"

"Where is she?—where is she?" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, seizing the Marquis by the collar of his coat. "Oh! if you have dared to harm a hair of her head——"

"Heavens! how shall I tell you the dreadful truth!" almost yelled forth the wretched Marquis as he writhed in the grasp of the Baronet.

"Villain, you have ravished her!" thundered Sir Douglas, hurling the Marquis from him with terrific violence: then dashing his open palms forcibly against his brow in all the wild fury of excitement, he exclaimed, "Would to God! that you had reported her death to me, rather than this!"

"Her death—her death!" repeated the Marquis, leaning upon the chair against which the Baronet had flung him: "yes—it *is* her death that I have to report——for she is a spotless virgin so far as I am concerned!"

The Baronet staggered back a few paces, and then reeled as if seized with a sudden vertigo; for despite the confusion into which his ideas were suddenly thrown, still was there a strong lurid beam penetrating them with a horrible clearness, bringing forth in dread relief the fact that the young girl was no more!

"Dead!" he at length muttered between his teeth: "dead, do you say?" he repeated in a low thick voice, as with a pale countenance and with wildness in his eyes he gazed upon the Marquis.

"Yes—she is dead," answered Leveson: "and if all my fortune could bring her back to life, it should be surrendered up."

"Tell me how this happened," said the Baronet, pressing his hands to his brow as if to steady his reeling brain: then sitting down, he appeared to await the explanations with the vacancy of look and the abstracted manner of one whose senses are in a whirl.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the Marquis, in a hurried tone of breathless agitation: "and then must I throw myself upon your mercy. In the middle of the night some men brought that girl hither—I knew not who she was—I never saw her before—I had not bargained with them for the service which they thus thrust upon me. The men told some tale about you and the young girl having been together at a hut on Shooters' Hill."

"Ah! then I understand who the villains were," exclaimed the Baronet, indignation once more bringing back the colour to his cheeks. "But go on—go on."

"They brought the girl here, then, after the fire at your house," resumed the Marquis; "and she was received into the mansion. Believing her, in plain truth, to have been your mistress, I fancied that her coyness was assumed: and perhaps I was too hasty—too importunate. At all events she sought refuge in that very room which contains the chairs—you know what chairs I mean—and sinking into one, the fright I presume was too much for her—and—and she died!"

"Poor Ariadne!" murmured the Baronet to himself: and averting his head, he dashed away a tear.

"On my life," continued the Marquis, "I have told you the truth, Huntingdon. I have explained the events precisely as they took place; and I need scarcely say that every possible remedy and restorative was applied——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas, suddenly. "Let me see her."

This command, uttered with a stern and abrupt imperiousness, was at once obeyed by the Marquis of Leveson; and he conducted the Baronet to the room where Ariadne lay. On the threshold of the chamber, Sir Douglas turned suddenly round and motioned the Marquis not to follow him: then closing the door abruptly, he remained alone in the chamber with the dead.

Advancing slowly, hesitatingly, and with a sensation of awe, to the side of the couch, Sir Douglas Huntingdon beheld all that remained of Ariadne Varian, stretched like a beautiful statue before his eyes. Her light hair, swept entirely away from her brows, fell back over the pillow upon which her head rested,—thus revealing the whole of that sweet countenance, with the delicately chiselled and faultless features on which a smile of angelic resignation appeared to rest, as if in the very moment of dissolution she had experienced the certainty that she was about to pass from the woes of

earth to the joys of heaven. Her eyelids were shut close, with the brown lashes resting upon the alabaster cheeks; so that she appeared as if she were only sleeping. The lips had remained slightly apart, affording a glimpse of the pearls within, and thus strengthening the impression that she was not dead, but only slept. The slight drapery which she wore, had settled in such a way as to develop the gentle undulations and softly swelling contours of her sylphid form: the arms remained gracefully rounded, like those of one in a slumber, and not with the rigidity of the last sleep from which there is no awakening upon earth;—and the symmetrical beauty of the lower limbs was likewise revealed by the plaits of her virgin vesture. Alas! that this should be the raiment of the dead!

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed upon her with a sort of incredulity that she was really no more; and for nearly a minute he thought she was only sleeping. He hoped so—and he earnestly prayed within himself that such might be the case. Yet the longer he looked down upon that alabaster countenance, the fainter grew that hope; while the stronger became the conviction that she was indeed no more!

"Yes—her spirit has fled for ever," he inwardly mused: "the young, the innocent, the beautiful has gone to that heaven which is her fitting home. She looks as if she did but sleep: and yet there is the absence of all vital colouring from those cheeks—and the breath comes not from between those lips. Her form is motionless, though not yet stricken with the rigidity of death. O Ariadne! I knew thee but for a few hours: and yet in that short time——But this is childish on my part," ejaculated the Baronet aloud, as he made a sudden effort to master his emotions: then feeling that his eyes were dim and that tears were trickling down his cheeks, he no longer sought to check the natural current of his grief;—and sitting down on the edge of the couch, he took the hand—the small cold hand—of Ariadne in his own; and averting his eyes from her marble countenance, he said aloud, and with a passionate outburst of feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance, which was so lovely in its animation!"

Then for upwards of a minute he remained in that position, wrapped up in the deepest thought; until at length regaining somewhat of his lost firmness, he rose abruptly—threw one last lingering look upon the deceased—and then quitted the room.

On the landing outside he found the Marquis waiting for him; and in silence did they proceed back to the apartment where they had previously conversed.

"That young girl, Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a deep and solemn tone, "has a brother who will sooner or later come to demand an account of his sister. Of me will he demand that account, inasmuch as I had written to him to state that she had found an asylum—an honourable asylum—with me; and when he comes therefore to inquire for her, what answer am I to give?"

"You will not compromise me?" said the Marquis, in a tone of earnest entreaty. "Can it not be averred that, rendered houseless by the fire, the damsel was consigned to the care of my housekeeper or niece, whichever you like to name—but that she died of the fright produced by that conflagration?"

"Yes—this tale must indeed be told," said the Baronet. "And now let instructions be given for the funeral of the poor girl."

"And what name is to be placed upon her coffin?" asked Lord Leveson, inwardly rejoiced to find that no exposure was to take place.

"What name?" repeated the Baronet. "There is no reason *now* why her real name should be concealed—therefore upon her coffin-lid have inscribed the words, *Ariadne Varian*."

"What!" ejaculated the Marquis, immediately struck by the name: "surely this poor girl——"

"Yes—I know what is passing in your mind," said Huntingdon, in a mournful tone: "she was the sister of him the narrative of whose escape you have read in the newspapers."

"But her brother," exclaimed the Marquis—"is he not a fugitive? and will he ever come to claim his sister?"

"If I can obtain for him a free pardon, for which I am about to interest myself," returned the Baronet. "But of all this no matter;—suffice it for you, Lord Leveson, to know that I am interested in the young man's behalf. Would to God that it were within the range of mortal power to recall his sister to life!"

With these words Sir Douglas Huntingdon hurried away in a state of mind such as he had never experienced befor

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

SYNCOPE AND TETANOS.

DIMLY and feebly did a sense of returning consciousness steal into Ariadne's mind,—slowly, slowly as the glimmering of dawn struggles against the mists of night in the eastern horizon. Whether she had fainted or slept she knew not: nor indeed had she the power to reflect upon the point—for her thoughts were all in confusion—not painfully agitating in the brain, but in dull, numb, inert chaos. That there had been a period of oblivion she had something like a distinct notion: but whether it had lasted for days, hours, or only minutes, she knew not—nor had she sufficient clearness of mind to conjecture.

But as the sense of consciousness came back—as this re-awakening of the intellect began to take place—she became aware that there was somebody in the room. She endeavoured to open her eyes—but could not. Nevertheless, she felt that the light of day was upon those closed lids, and that it was not a stupendous darkness that weighed them down. Amidst the dull and stagnant chaos of her thoughts, flickered in upon her intellect a somewhat brighter beam than the primal one of returning consciousness; and this new ray of intelligence seemed to enlighten her the least thing more distinctly as to her exact condition. She became aware, indeed, that she was stretched upon a couch; but after that vain attempt to open her eyes, she remained for perhaps two or three whole minutes without any farther endeavour to move. Then hearing a voice suddenly speaking near her, the tones flowing murmuringly upon her ears without her being able to understand the words uttered, she instinctively at-

tempted to turn round towards the speaker. But no!—she was bound hand and foot by some invisible and unknown spell—enchained by some stupendous and indomitable influence—turned into a statue so far as her physical being was concerned, and animated with only just a sufficiency of the spiritual essence to give her a dim and twilight idea of her own condition.

Still was her appreciation of this condition too indistinct, too vague, and too obscure to produce any poignant feeling. Sensation she had, it was true—but so lulled, so steeped in a mystic lethargy, so dull, numb, and sluggish, that it had not sufficient vitality for any keenness of reflection, whether painful or otherwise.

Gradually the idea began to become strengthened in Ariadne's mind relative to the presence of some one near her; and at length it seemed as if an inspiration dawned in unto her soul, whispering the name of Douglas Huntingdon. Then she appeared to acquire a knowledge that there was such a person as he in the world; but how or when she had known him before, she had no distinct comprehension. She heard him breathing syllables of sorrow near her; and then she felt him take her hand in his own. A pulse seemed to thrill through her entire frame at that contact,—yes, thrill even pleasurably, as if it were the touch of life giving back animation into one on whom death sat heavy and cold: but yet that thrill was only faint and feeble—and it imparted not complete vitality nor broke the spell that entranced the maiden.

She felt her hand clasped in that of Huntingdon; and she felt, too, by the touch that *his* hand burnt with the fever-heat of excitement, and that *her own* was as cold as ice. She longed—Oh! how she longed to return the pressure which she felt: for now a strange, vague, and ill-defined perception of the real truth of her condition stole into her mind, and made her feel a desire to make known the fact that she was indeed *alive!* But not in the slightest—not in the faintest—not in the remotest degree could she return that pressure: not a muscle could she move—not a nerve quivered in response to her will. The faintest breeze has more power to shake the stateliest tree, than her volition could exercise over her own faculties of motion. Still as death—motionless as a statue, she lay—with a gentle glimmering of the spark of life that was just conscious of its own existence, but could not make this existence known to another. And now therefore arose in her mind the conviction that she breathed not though she lived—and on the other hand, that she was not dead though animation was all but utterly suspended.

A still brighter clearness shed its influence upon her mind—that mind which thus, after having first awakened as it were in the midst of a vast hall where a single lamp burnt dimly in the midst of the blackness, now felt as if additional lamps were being lighted up one by one so as to set forth by these slow degrees some fresh features of the place. She heard those words to which the Baronet gave utterance with so much feeling—"*I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance which was so lovely in its animation!*" Yes—she heard, she understood these words: she even perceived the impassioned vibration of tone which characterised them—the amount of anguish which they expressed! And again did she experience a thrill of the pulse through her entire frame—but a thrill that was felt not by him who held her hand and who believed it was the hand of the dead. Then this hand of hers was quitted by that of the Baronet: the contact had ceased—the fevered flesh and the marble-cold flesh touched each other no more—and instead of the thrill of the vibrating pulse, it was an ice chill that struck to the very core of the maiden's heart!

But now she felt—intuitively, instinctively felt—that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was gazing upon her. Her eyelids were closed, as we have already said; but it was in looking upward as it were from the mind itself—by the exertion, so to speak, of an inner sense of vision—that she thus felt that he *was* looking upon her. She could even understand the look—she could comprehend its nature—lingering, longing, sad, and mournful. But, O God! why did she not return it?—just heaven! why could she *not?*

She heard the door close: and now she knew that she was alone. The silence suddenly struck her as being awful, awful in the extreme: and then too, at the same instant, a more horrible clearness sprang up in her mind—a fearful light flaming up in her soul! In a word, she understood all in a moment,—that she was in a species of trance—a syncope—and that she was believed to be dead!

Dead!—great heaven, what awful thoughts now sprang up in her imagination! Was the hand of death in reality upon her?—was she dying?—would she soon be really *dead?* Death! its bitterness was not past—its sting was there—and the grave perhaps would soon assert its victory. But to die—Oh! to die while she felt that she was so young—for her thoughts were now every instant becoming more vividly clear and more keenly perceptive,—to die so young, it was terrible, terrible! Then her brother, too—for she now remembered him and thought of him—yes, his image suddenly sprang up clearly and tangibly as it were before her,—this well beloved brother, what would *he* think, what would he say when he heard that she had died thus prematurely, thus suddenly? But no—she could not die—she must not die yet! Innocent, stainless of crime—aye, even immaculate though she were in mind as well as in body—she was not prepared to die! She would move her limbs—she would turn round on that couch—she would raise herself up—and she would exhibit all the powers of full, living, breathing, moving vitality! Alas! vain, vain were the thoughts—vain the aspirations—vain the endeavours: so far from stirring hand or foot, she could not even move a muscle of her countenance—nor unclose an eyelid—nor feel her lips quiver with the breath of life!

We said that her mind had now a horrible clearness: and such indeed it was. For her thoughts began to flow in still more frightful and hideous channels—depicting all the paraphernalia of death—the laying out of the corpse (in *her* case perhaps a *seeming* corpse)—the putting on of the raiment of the dead—the enclosing in the shell—the screwing down of the lid of the coffin—the consignment to the grave—and the shovelling in of the damp and wormy clay! Heavens! as all these harrowing thoughts swept through the brain of the poor young girl, she endured an agony of agonies ineffable for human language—an agony all the more agonising because endured by one whose form was motionless and could not bend or yield as it were

with recoil, trembling, or shudder, to the dreadful influence of those thoughts. And now, with the extremest poignancy was the fact presented to her mind that she was not even *nearly* dead, but that her state was one presenting that phenomenon so strange, so awful, and so terrible in the history of human nature!

The horror produced by all these thoughts gradually merged into the more stupifying state of consternation; and then a dreamy repose stole over the young maiden. Oblivion supervened; and thus for a while were her senses steeped in forgetfulness. How long this interval lasted, she however knew not; and when she returned to consciousness she became aware that her posture on the couch was somewhat changed. She was now lying completely on her back; and she felt that her arms were placed close by her sides, and that her feet were likewise in close and parallel contact. Next she perceived, by the sensation, that something was fastened under her chin; and as she began to ponder upon the meaning of all this, the recollection of what had passed just previously to the last interval of oblivion slowly came back to her mind, until at length the awful—the crushing—the appalling thought settled in her soul, that she was laid out as a corpse!

Horror of horrors! With full, poignant, and vivid keenness, did all her consciousness return: and she once more became possessed of every faculty of perception. There was no doubt as to her actual position: she knew it—she understood it—she felt it all. She was believed to be dead—she was laid out in the usual manner ere being consigned to the coffin—and the winding-sheet already wrapped her form! The thought of all this was maddening, maddening. Her brain appeared to be on fire—and the sensation of gnawing flames had she also at the heart, though that heart beat not. Her eyelids were closed—nor could she open them: nevertheless lightnings appeared to flash before her vision. It was horrible, horrible, to experience all this, and yet not be able so much as to relieve the harrowed feelings with a shudder or a shriek. For when something dreadful meets the eye or strikes upon the mind, it *is* a relief to shudder in recoil or to send forth an ejaculation from the lips. But here was the unhappy girl bound as it were in the adamantine chains of utter petrifaction—a marble body with a soul of fire—incapable of performing the least function of life, and yet inspired with all life's keenest and acutest sensations!

All the faculties belonging to the mind seemed to have concentrated in themselves the vitality which naturally belonged to the body; and all the senses were sharpened to even a painful degree. Thus she could hear sounds the faintest and slightest imaginable—such as insects picking in the wood of the bedstead with the noise of the deathwatch! She could smell the clean linen which wrapped her as a winding-sheet, and which, perhaps from the nature of the soap used in washing it, had a certain earthy odour that made it indeed appear the raiment of the dead. She could feel all the plaits and folds of these cerements as they lay loose upon one portion of her form and tighter on another: she could feel the linen passing round her head, and the cambric that was tied as a bandage to hold up her chin. Through her closed lids could her eyes perceive the light of the sun streaming through the curtains of the window facing the couch—those beams which borrowed a deeper redness from the hue of those curtains! Thus were her senses acuminated to the keenest edge; and as the body was left motionless, those faculties appeared to exercise themselves with all the concentration of vitality which they had absorbed as it were from the physical powers.

In the midst of her harrowing thoughts she heard the door open, and the housekeeper's voice say in a low and mournful tone, "Walk in—walk in, Mr. Stimson—walk in."

Then the door was closed again very gently; and two persons advanced up to the side of the bed—the housekeeper and the man whom she had called Mr. Stimson.

"What a sweet corpse the dear girl does make," said the housekeeper, assuming a whimpering tone and heaving three or four deep-drawn sighs. "Ah! Mr. Stimson, she wasn't here many hours, but I really had taken quite a fancy to her—she was so amiable and good: and I do believe that in the same short time she grew quite as fond of me."

"Poor young lady!" returned Mr. Stimson, in a hollow and lugubrious voice. "How come it all about, ma'am?"

"Why, you see, Mr. Stimson," resumed the housekeeper, "this young lady was staying at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, and his house was burnt down last night. Such rapid progress did the fire make, that the dear girl well nigh fell a sacrifice to the flames; but a couple of noble-hearted gentlemen—one an officer in the Guards, and the other the son of a Bishop—rescued her at the peril of their lives; and the officer wrapped her up in his great military cloak. Then she was put into a hackney-coach that was passing at the time; and as Sir Douglas is very intimate here, he thought the best thing he could do was to send her to be taken care of by Lady Ernestina. The fright which the young lady received from the fire was no doubt dreadful; but we thought she had quite recovered, and didn't dream that she was in any possible danger. But about ten o'clock this morning the poor dear creature seemed to be taken so bad suddenly, that we got quite alarmed; and before we could even send for the doctor she was dead. Lord bless you, Mr. Stimson, she went off just like a child going to sleep in its mother's arms;—and with her dear head, poor young creature, pillowed on my bosom, she breathed her last."

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Stimson, "it's a very great saytisfaction for you to know that you did your best, while death was doing his wust,—and that she went off like that there, with her head on your buzzim. She's as lovely a corpse as ever I had the measuring of."

"Yes," whimpered the housekeeper; "hasn't she got a sweet pretty face—and her flesh is just like wax. Poor thing! the worms will soon make havoc upon it."

"Poor thing!" echoed Mr. Stimson, in his deep sepulchral voice, which he purposely made as hollow and lugubrious as possible. "The wums indeed will prey upon the poor gal."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader

that Ariadne's feelings were now drawn to such an extreme tension, that it appeared as if her brain must burst and her heart-strings snap. She had no difficulty in discovering, from the preceding discourse, who Mr. Stimson was. He was evidently the undertaker. But the vile hypocrisy of that woman, the housekeeper—the false version she gave of the circumstances of Ariadne's arrival at the mansion—the assumed sympathy and commiseration with which she sought to play her part in the presence of the undertaker,—all this added to the poignancy and painfulness of the scene. But then the discourse itself—to hear herself styled *a corpse*—then the remark that her flesh was colourless as wax;—and lastly the observation—the frightful observation, relative to the worms soon preying upon her—Oh! all this was the most exquisite refinement of ineffable agonies!

But this crucifixion of the feelings was not yet passed through. She felt the undertaker place his rule upon her to measure her length for the coffin; and she heard him mutter to himself, in a low under tone, the exact measurement of feet and inches as he thus took it. Good God! how within herself she battled—Oh! how she battled for the power of sending forth one long loud thrilling shriek!—how she strove—heaven alone can tell how she strove—to force a vent for the transcending agony of her feelings! But no: all her efforts were vain and useless. The spell—the awful spell was upon her: and still like a marble woman was she animated with a soul of fire.

"And so you say, ma'am," observed Mr. Stimson, speaking in a low voice that was well suitable for the chamber of death, but yet with something more of a business tone than hitherto,—"and so, ma'am, it is to be a wery decent funeral—not over expensive, but respectable?"

"Just so," responded the housekeeper. "His lordship has entrusted the whole management to me; and I think, Mr. Stimson," she added in a significant tone, "that you and I can make everything comfortable between us?"

"Oh! to be sure," responded the undertaker. "Come, ma'am, tell me candidly how high you dare go: and then I can tell you how much profit you and me can sheer betwixt us."

"Well, I don't think his lordship would mind sixty or seventy guineas."

"Wery good," observed Mr. Stimson, with a low hollow chuckle which appeared to issue from a coffin or a vault: "let's say seventy-five guineas, and then we can divide thirty betwixt us. That will make fifteen for your sheer."

"Agreed," said the housekeeper: "but you must send in a regular proper bill, because the Marquis sometimes takes it into his head to look over his accounts."

"Don't be afeard, ma'am. I will put down fifteen guineas for a brick grave, and it shan't be no brick grave at all. Then, how many do you think will attend the funeral?"

"I don't know who will attend it: the Marquis, I suppose—Sir Douglas Huntingdon—just for appearance' sake—and that's all."

"Well, we can put down ten mourners," observed Stimson; "'cause why, the bill must be made out to look respectable. Ten mourners—that will be a guinea each for hat-band and gloves, and a guinea each for the use of mourning cloaks: so there we have twenty guineas at once. Fifteen, as already said, for the brick grave, makes thirty-five. Coffin, fifteen—makes fifty: shell, five guineas—and use of pall, five guineas—there's sixty. Hearse and mourning coaches, ten guineas—that's seventy: and ten of my chaps, half a guinea each—there's five guineas: and that makes up the seventy-five."

"Well, you really are one of the cleverest gentlemen I ever met with," said the housekeeper, with a subdued laugh. "But after all, fifteen guineas a-piece is very little to get out of this business."

"Well," observed Mr. Stimson, "I'll manage to add five to your sheer. Let me see—I said fifteen guineas for the coffin: of course I meant a first-rate oaken one; but I tell you what I'll do—I'll give a common one, painted and grained to look like oak—and that's the way I'll do it. The poor gal there won't be none the wiser."

"Ah! you dear clever fellow," chuckled the housekeeper in a subdued tone: "a man of your talent, Mr. Stimson, ought to have been Prime Minister, instead of an undertaker."

"Well, ma'am, I think I *have* got a little talent," returned Mr. Stimson, with a complacent manner: "but I am wery well satisfied with my vocation, and don't know that I should improve it particular by a change. But I think we have done here all that is required now?"

"One word," said the housekeeper: "when shall the funeral take place?"

"Suppose we say this day week?" suggested the undertaker. "The corpse is a nice fresh 'un," he continued, laying his great heavy rough hand upon Ariadne's cheek, "and won't spile. Besides, it will look better to take plenty of time for the funeral; 'cause why, we are to pretend to have a brick grave and a oak coffin."

"Then let us say this day week," rejoined the housekeeper: and she thereupon quitted the room, accompanied by Mr. Stimson.

Ariadne was once more alone. Alone indeed: but, good heavens! with what hideous, horrible, excruciating thoughts—thoughts that swept like fiery arrows through her brain, conjuring up images from the charnel-house and the grave! Like ghastly spectres treading to the solemn measure of a dirge, did they pass in array before her mental vision. Yes—for she was treated as one that was dead—laid out as a corpse—and had just been an ear-witness to the arrangements devised *for her own funeral!* She had felt the rule of the undertaker taking her measure for a coffin; and she had felt likewise his rough hand laid upon her cheek with the cold brutal indifference of one who is accustomed to handle *the dead!* And then that woman, who had affected so much sympathy in her behalf, was now actually trafficking in her supposed death—trafficking for profit to be derived from the funeral of her whose fate she pretended to deplore. And then that cold-blooded, heartless, hypocritical scoundrel—the undertaker himself—*he* also was making a market of the dead: he also was practising the slimy ways of the money-grubber in respect to the supreme and most solemn rites of mortality and of the Christian faith.

All these circumstances—all these reflections—combined to aggravate, if possible, the horror which previously filled Ariadne's soul: and she

already felt as if she were in the depths of the cold grave, with the clay filled up over the coffin!

Again did the stupor of oblivion enwrap her mind: and when she re-awoke to consciousness utter darkness rested upon her closed eyelids. The silence and the blackness of night entombed her—stupendous night, always fraught with vague and dreamy fears even for those in fullest health, but now marked by ten thousand terrors for her who was alive in the secrecy of her own sensations, but dead to the exercise of all faculties—dead also to the world without!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE TRANCE CONTINUED.

IMMEDIATELY upon quitting Leveson House, Sir Douglas Huntingdon repaired to Carlton Palace and sought an interview with Venetia. Lady Sackville at once received the Baronet in the breakfast-parlour where she was seated at the time; and pointing towards a newspaper which lay upon the table, she said, "My dear friend, it was with the sincerest sorrow that I read the half dozen lines in that journal which mention the fire at your house last night. It is however a subject of congratulation that you are safe. But you look dreadfully careworn and haggard——"

"No wonder, Venetia," observed the Baronet, "after all that I have gone through."

He then sate down and gave her an account of everything that had transpired within the last two days. Commencing his narrative from the moment when he parted with Louisa Stanley at Dartford, he proceeded to describe the perilous adventures of Shooters' Hill. He told Venetia how circumstances had thrown Ariadne in his way—how she had saved his life at the hut—how they had fled together—and how he had given her an asylum at his own house: he then explained who she was, and in confidence revealed to Lady Sackville's ear those particulars relative to Theodore and his sister which have been made known to the reader in a previous chapter. Lastly, he narrated the circumstances of the young girl's abduction to the Marquis of Leveson's house, and concluded with a description of her death.

At first, when he began to speak of Ariadne, Sir Douglas observed that Venetia's beauteous eyes glittered somewhat with a jealous uneasiness: and naturally flattered by this proof that he was very far from being an object of indifference to the lovely idol of fashion, he cautiously abstained from uttering a word calculated to show that Ariadne had made the slightest impression of a tender character upon his heart. He spoke of her in a tone of compassionate friendship, and speedily observed that a gleam of satisfaction stole over the features of Lady Sackville. But when he came to that portion of his narrative which described Ariadne's death—or rather her supposed death,—when indeed he explained how the sensual brutality of the Marquis of Leveson had been the cause of the lamentable catastrophe—Venetia's splendid countenance coloured with indignation, and she murmured between her set teeth, "That detestable Marquis of Leveson! will the day of retribution never dawn for *him*?"

"And now, my dear Venetia," resumed the Baronet, "I will explain to you in a few words the object of my visit. Indeed you must grant me a boon this moment—you must do me a service without delay——"

"You know, my dear Douglas," she responded, with a peculiar look of mingled tenderness and significancy, "that there is nothing you can demand of me which I am not prepared to grant. Tell me, therefore, how I can serve you. But I think I can already conjecture:—is it not the pardon of Theodore Varian that you require?"

"It is, dearest Venetia—it is," replied the Baronet.

Lady Sackville spoke not another word; but rising from her seat, quitted the room. She remained absent for about an hour, at the expiration of which interval she returned; and by the smile of satisfaction that played upon her charming lips, Sir Douglas saw that she had succeeded.

"This is the pardon—the full, free, unconditional pardon of Theodore Varian," she observed, handing the Baronet a paper. "Fortunately the Secretary of State was with his Royal Highness at the moment; and therefore the document is duly countersigned. I explained to them both a sufficiency of the particulars connected with the case of Theodore Varian to prove that he was as much sinned against by his late master Emmerson, as sinning: and I likewise told them in confidence a little of his poor sister's history. The Minister therefore made not the slightest objection to grant the pardon; and as for his Royal Highness," added Venetia, proudly, "of course *he* was instantaneously prepared to grant my demand."

"Ten thousand thanks, dear Venetia, for this prompt kindness on your part," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, glancing his eye over the paper ere he consigned it to his pocket. "And now you will excuse me for leaving you abruptly, inasmuch as I am anxious to transmit this pardon to Theodore Varian, together with the letter containing the sad intelligence of his sister's death."

"And do you purpose," asked Venetia, "to veil from Mr. Varian the infamy of the Marquis of Leveson towards his sister?"

"Of what avail, Venetia, will it be to augment the sorrows of this already too unfortunate young man? Besides, I myself have not been immaculate enough in my life to feel justified in becoming the accuser of others; but on the other hand I have so many faults of my own to screen, that I consider it but just to throw a veil if possible over the faults of my friends or acquaintances."

"Well, be it so, Douglas," observed Venetia. "And now depart to execute your purpose with regard to Varian: I will not detain you a minute longer. But remember," she added, with a meaning look, "I shall always be delighted and happy to see you."

"Ah! Venetia, do not fancy that I am not likewise too happy to find myself in your society:"—then hastily raising her hand to his lips, he hurried from the room.

Returning to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, he sate down and penned a letter to Theodore Varian. In this epistle he broke to the young brother as gently as he could the intelligence of the sister's death, which he attributed to the shock produced by the conflagration upon the previously attenuated mind of the young girl. This

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etter, accompanied by the pardon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon at once sent off by a courier to Dover, in the hope that the messenger might overtake Varian previous to his embarkation for France: but if not, the courier was instructed to lose no time in following the young man to the Continent. Having adopted these measures, Sir Douglas Huntingdon turned his attention to his own affairs: for he felt for the first time in his life the necessity of expelling thought by means of bustle and occupation. Indeed, the image of Ariadne was uppermost in his mind: and frequently, frequently did he find himself giving way to the gloomiest reflections, and pondering upon her whom he had known but for so short a time and who had been so rudely and suddenly snatched away from him, as he thought, *for ever!*

In the evening Doctor Copperas called at the hotel; and on being shown to the room where the Baronet was sitting alone after dinner, the physician expressed himself much shocked at the tidings he had received relative to the death of his fair patient.

"One or two circumstances have rather astonished me in this matter," observed the doctor, as he sate down to take a glass of wine with the Baronet: "one is that the poor girl should have been sent to find an asylum at the house of the Marquis of Leveson, who is an unmarried man—or rather a widower: and the second is that I, being the medical attendant of the young lady, was not called in this morning when she was found to be dying. At all events, if his lordship had not chosen to send for me, he would at all events have acted prudently in summoning that truly wonderful man—the greatest ornament of his profession—I mean Doctor Thurston."

"My good friend," returned the Baronet, "your two objections are very easily met. In the first place, it was necessary to consign the young girl

to the care of some kind-hearted lady; and being acquainted with Lady Ernestina Dysart, I thought it best to send the poor creature to her. Secondly, the Marquis of Leveson was unaware that you were the medical attendant——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Doctor Copperas: "I am perfectly satisfied with what you have said, my dear Sir Douglas. But perhaps you will permit me to observe that in these cases of rapid sinking and speedy dissolution arising from fright, there are so many curious phases and phenomena that they never ought to be lost sight of by the medical man in attendance at the time. Now I feel perfectly convinced that if that very remarkable authority Dr. Thurston had been called in on this occasion, he would have given to the world a most valuable treatise upon the subject."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in no humour to converse with so tedious a personage as Doctor Copperas: he accordingly fell into a deep abstraction—and the physician, having dilated for about twenty minutes upon the merits of Doctor Thurston as a medical practitioner, and the learning of Doctor Thurston as a medical authority, took his leave.

A couple of days passed; and the Baronet's confidential domestic James returned from Dover. He had succeeded in finding Theodore Varian, and had delivered to him the messages and the purse of money sent by the Baronet, whose advice it appeared the young man had promptly followed by repairing to Calais. Indeed, James had seen him embark on board the hoy; and thus was it clear that he had quitted England ere being overtaken by the messenger who bore his pardon.

The next day Sir Douglas Huntingdon proceeded to Leveson House to inquire how the preparations proceeded for Ariadne's funeral. The Marquis was not at home at the time; and Lady Ernestina Dysart, who detested the Baronet ever since his interference in the affair of Louisa Stanley, affected to be retained in her own room by indisposition. The housekeeper accordingly took upon herself to answer the Baronet's queries; and she assured him that the most satisfactory preparations were being made. Sir Douglas Huntingdon desired the woman to conduct him to the chamber where Ariadne lay; for he experienced an irresistible longing to behold once more in death that sweet countenance which had made so deep an impression upon him in life. The housekeeper accordingly proceeded to what was believed to be *the chamber of death*; and the moment the Baronet crossed the threshold a feeling of indescribable awe mingled with the profound mournfulness which already filled his heart.

But when he beheld that wax-like countenance on which there was nothing of the ghastliness or loathsomeness of death,—when he beheld it fresh and damask-like as it was in life,—the only appearance of death being the utter absence of all vital tint,—he could not help exclaiming, "Good heavens! surely she does but sleep."

The housekeeper shook her head with an assumed melancholy, as she observed in a low tone, "When no positive disease or previous illness is the cause of death, the corpse frequently remains thus fresh and well preserved."

"Death!—is this indeed death? can it be death?" mused the Baronet, in a low tone to himself, as he stood gazing down upon that countenance so soft in its very rigidity, so sweet in its immoveability, so full of ineffable expression in its utter stillness. "If this be death, then death is not terrible: no—'tis nothing but a slumber a little more profound than that into which we sink at night—only, only, to this slumber *here* there is no awakening! This is the eternal night that on earth hath no dawn!"

While thus musing, in a low tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon had bent over the form of the young girl who lay stretched upon that couch; and a tear dropped from his eyelash upon her cheek. With his cambric handkerchief he gently wiped it away, murmuring between his lips, "Poor Ariadne—poor Ariadne! if you had lived, the feeling which you had already inspired and which I experience now in my soul, would have expanded into the strongest and purest love—and you should have been my wife!"

Then stooping down, he gently kissed her alabaster forehead, and turning abruptly away, hurried from the room, followed by the housekeeper.

If anybody a few days previously had told Sir Douglas Huntingdon that within a week he was destined to be moved by such feelings as these—destined to experience the influence of such melting, chastening, and reforming thoughts trooping through his mind—he would have ridiculed the prophecy and laughed at the prophet. But no man can say how soon the sentiment of love may animate his breast, nor how quickly it may enthrone itself in the sanctuary of the heart!

It was now the afternoon of the fourth day of Ariadne's supposed death; and during this period a profound stupor had entranced her thoughts at such frequent and for such long intervals that her soul, rent with a million tortures when awake, was thus refreshed and invigorated as it were by those periods when its agonies were numbed in syncope and its thoughts steeped in oblivion. But to describe the reflections and the terrors which she experienced when awake, would be to recapitulate that delineation of the feelings which we have previously attempted. We may however observe that occasionally did a gleam of hope penetrate through the murky clouds that girt her soul—a hope that she might yet be enabled to shake off the trammels of this tremendous spell which was upon her and give evidence of her vitality before being consigned to the coffin and buried alive!

She was awake—and she was giving way to this hope at the moment when Sir Douglas Huntingdon paid that visit which has just been alluded to. She immediately recognised his voice as he stood speaking musingly by the side of the couch; and with that keenness of sense which has previously been mentioned, she could hear as plainly all that he said as if he were speaking in a much louder tone—whereas the housekeeper who stood close by, could not catch the meaning of his words. And by a sort of mesmeric influence, also, did Ariadne become aware that he was gazing down upon her. Yes; and it seemed as if through her closed eyelids she could even observe the nature of that look, so full of a mournful tenderness: and then ineffable feelings sprang up in her heart—and when she heard him murmur those words avowing his love and deploring that she had not lived to become his wife, the poor girl felt for a moment as if she were being sud-

denly gifted with the power to cast off the spell of the trance, fling her arms around his neck, weep upon his breast, and prove that she was alive! That was a moment—a single moment of beatific feeling for the unfortunate Ariadne: but the darkest, deepest, blackest despair suddenly seized upon her soul as she felt herself still tied down to that couch—still enchained in motionless rigidity—still cold and lifeless as marble in body, though with a mind that was every instant flaming up with the accumulated violence of a thousand volcanos!

Then she felt the tear-drop upon her cheek. Heavens! it seemed to sink down into her very heart. Oh! that tear!—that tear! it was a pledge of love——Good God! what mockery for her to dream of such bliss as that which is concentrated in the word *love!*

Deeper—yes, deeper, deeper down into the lowest abyss of despair was she plunged, as all hope abandoned her. Then she felt the tear wiped away from her face: then the kiss was imprinted upon her brow;—and then there were sounds of hurried retreating steps—and the door closed again—and she was once more alone. Yes: and once more did she relapse into that stupor which gave her mental energies the means and the leisure to repose, and regain their strength in order to put forth their excruciating vitality again!

When she next awoke she became aware that there was a candle or a lamp in the room. Through her closed eyelids could she distinguish where it was; and then she heard several heavy feet moving about the chamber, though with an evident endeavour that their tread should be as light as possible. A horrible suspicion sprang up in the poor girl's mind; and it was almost immediately confirmed by other sounds which struck upon her ears. These sounds were those of wood coming in contact with wood—one thing being lifted upon another: and then she knew that the undertaker's men were in the room placing the shell upon the tressels!

It instantaneously struck her that if ever the excruciation of her mental agonies should become sufficiently keen to inspire her physical being with new life, this must be the moment. If the asphyxia should now prove stronger than that anguish which was torturing her soul to such an extent as apparently to render it capable of inspiring marble itself with motion, then in that case did it seem as if all hope might be really abandoned. She felt her mind struggling within—or rather she made it struggle with all the violence of desperation to force it as it were to give vent to its feelings in any one of the numerous evidences of life: such as a shudder—a shriek—a stretching forth of the arms—a turning of the head—an opening of the eyelid—or even a quivering of the lips. But no: nothing of all this could she accomplish. Her mind was imprisoned in a form rigid and impracticable as marble; and it seemed to her as if she herself were vainly struggling for emancipation from the interior of a stone sepulchre in which, like a Roman vestal of ancient times, she was walled up!

But we cannot describe the full horror of her thoughts on this head: we must leave the reader much to imagine and depict unto himself. For now the moment—the dread moment had come when Ariadne was to be placed in the shell. It was from habit that the undertaker and his men trod as gently as possible in the room—from habit that they spoke in under-tones suited to the chamber of death—from habit that they laid their hands upon her gently and delicately. It was habit all: for in their nature they were no more susceptible of sympathy than other men. On the contrary—from being in the frequent companionship of the dead, they knew neither awe nor pity. Indeed, their feelings were much blunted and their hearts much brutalized by their avocation: and if a proof of this were wanting, it might have been found in the fact that the housekeeper, knowing their predilection, at this moment entered the room with a tray containing a bottle of spirits and several glasses. Thereupon the undertaker and his men turned away from the couch, and approached the toilette-table where the housekeeper deposited the tray.

"Now, ma'am, will you jine in?" asked Mr Stimson, as he filled all the glasses round.

"Well, I'll just take a *leetle* drop, so as not to seem unfriendly," said the housekeeper.

"That's right, ma'am. And now," continued Stimson, raising a brimming glass to his lips, "here's your very good health, ma'am—and here's his lordship's health too—and wishing us all good luck:"—with which benediction the undertaker screwed up his eyes, as if to shut out the fume of the liquor as he tossed it down his throat.

Having refreshed themselves with a dram, the servitors of death returned to the couch, and once more resumed their hold upon Ariadne. Not the concentrated anguish of ten thousand racks—not the essence powerfully condensed of all the most refined excruciations of the Inquisition—can convey any adequate idea of the agony of agonies which the young girl now endured. All such ideas as the coiling of fiery serpents around the form—of burning alive in candescent flames—of tearing off the scalp and dropping boiling oil upon the brain laid bare—of flaying alive and searing the excoriated flesh with red-hot iron—of passing red-hot needles through the eyes, all such ideas as these, we say, fell incomparably short of the illimitable agony endured by the poor girl as the undertaker and his men lifted her from the bed and put her into the narrow shell.

This being done, the men retraced their way to the toilette-table, and regaled themselves with another dram.

"I never did see a corpse keep so fresh," observed Stimson: "there's no oozing out of the mouth—no discolouring under the eyes—not even any particular blueness of the nails. And then, too, she felt as limp and supple as if only in a fit."

"But I shouldn't like to be only half as dead for all that," said one of the men. "Poor thing," he continued, with the mechanical utterance of the sympathetic ejaculation: "she'll be discoloured and blue enough in a few days—and she'll get stark and stiff enough, too, before she's put into her coffin and screwed down."

Screwed down! good heavens, what dreadful words—overwhelming as a torrent, devouring as a conflagration, crushing as a thunderbolt! Life appeared now to be really ebbing away from the statue-like form of Ariadne Varian: and oh! how she wished that she might be really dying—that

her spirit might be indeed passing, so that she could avoid that crowning horror—that transcendant catastrophe,—*being buried alive!* Again did a stupor come over her: again were her senses wrapped in oblivion.

The undertaker and his men remained in the room until they had emptied the bottle of spirits; and then they took their leave of the housekeeper and their departure from the mansion.

Presently—she could not tell how long after the stupor had fallen upon her — a roseate radiance appeared to be shining all around Ariadne. She was no longer in the shell—no longer wrapped in the garments of the grave—no longer laid out as a corpse. She felt as if she had been wafted into some other sphere; and a strain of sweet celestial music came floating upon her ears. Then, as those silver octaves made the air melodious, she fancied that she beheld angel-shapes hovering before her eyes—shapes of seraphs and of sylphs, with azure garments and white wings. The music swelled into the divinest symphony, exultant throughout the vast regions of space: and it seemed to the maiden that she was wafted quick and unimpeded, but by some invisible power, through the starry firmament, — mingling with aerial beings of indescribable beauty. An ineffable pleasure pervaded her soul as she called to mind all the horrors from which she had just escaped: for the barrier between life and death seemed to be indeed passed over, and herself emancipated from the trammels of earth and now soaring in heaven. Presently a form of angelic loveliness and radiant with the sunniest smiles, came floating through the roseate atmosphere,—a female form clad in streaming robes of azure and of gold, arranged in alternate foldings and spangled with countless gems. The long yellow hair floated like a beaming meteor, diffusing an enhanced glory all around. But nothing could equal the celestial benignity and seraphic joy that mingled in that beauteous countenance: so that under this angelic figuration Ariadne recollected not immediately the features of her mother—her long dead mother! Now indeed she knew that she was in heaven: and extending her arms towards the advancing shape, she anticipated the next moment to be elapsed to its bosom,—when all in an instant the sweet and ecstatic thoughts filling her soul were turned into horror and dismay — the angel shape vanished from her view—utter darkness suddenly entombed her—and down, down she sank as if into an unfathomable abyss!

Down, down she kept descending: down, down into the blackest darkness, where the only change was that made by hideous shapes blacker than the blackness, darker than the darkness itself! Yes—all was confusion and whirl in her brain—a series and a change of mental agony. Now all of a sudden a tremendous light appeared; and in the distance were seen the inextinguishable but unconsuming fires of hell. No nearer however to them did she approach — but kept falling down, down, far beyond the influence of the molten flames that filled the vast and blazing prison of Satan's kingdom. But as her eyes remained fixed upon that region of fire, she saw that it broke into the shape of immense buildings—vast palaces, tremendous domes, and colossal pillars—all made of the living flame and exhaling the red atmosphere which hung like a lurid cloud above it. Still also as she gazed, she observed the back-ground of that vast city of Satan,—a back-ground forming hills and mountains, some covered with forests, others merely dotted with groups of trees, but all wrought as it were out of the lurid opaque fire. Still keener and keener grew the maiden's power of vision. She now beheld the windows of all the houses, mansions, and palaces in that city of hell; and she saw that those windows were defended by immense bars of fire. But now the entire city seemed to be made of red hot iron,—every feature of the place of one colour—everything formed of one material. And through those bars she beheld myriads of shadowy forms, all red and glowing as if they themselves were penetrated with fire, or heated as it were to a candescent and almost transparent state. Keener grew her vision still: and she saw more. She beheld ineffable anguish depicted on every countenance—an anguish such as no living language can describe. In the palaces she beheld the shapes of those who had once been the kings and queens of the earth: but their crowns were now of red hot iron, fastened with red hot nails upon their burning but unconsuming heads. Their sceptres had changed into fiery serpents—their orbs into scorpions of flame. The purple, the scarlet, and the ermine robes that decorated them on earth were succeeded by a flowing vesture of flame; and if in any region of hell the fire was hotter and the torture more agonising than elsewhere, then was this supremacy of all excruciations to be found in these palaces of the kings and queens. In the great mansions were the shades of those who had been prelates and church-dignitaries upon earth, and who having made religion a means to heap up wealth and honours for their own aggrandisement, were now deservedly enduring retribution in the ebbless and eternal waves of flame that swept through the mansions of red hot iron. And in other mansions were the lords and those who had been great ones upon earth, but who having made earth a heaven for themselves and a hell for the masses of their fellow-creatures, were now enduring the real hell of the other world!

But gradually all this tremendous spectacle began to fade away from Ariadne's view; and still she appeared to be falling down with the velocity of a flash of lightning—until all was dark once more. Then gradually she awoke to the consciousness that she had been passing through the phases of a dream, wherein she had beholden both heaven and hell!

Then where was she? Were these thoughts—these harrowing thoughts that poured back into her memory, laden with horrible reminiscences,—were all these a dream likewise? Was it a dream that she had been in a trance—that she had been treated as one dead—and that preparations were made for her funeral? Was all this a dream—ah! dared she think so? But, no: great God! no—it was not a dream! She was *there*—in utter darkness—unable to move—pent up in the narrowest possible space: yes—she was in a trance—and she was in her shell!

Another two days passed away; and during the interval very brief indeed had been the moments of consciousness endured by the unfortunate girl. But it was now on the sixth evening of her supposed death, and while she was suffering the tortures of a more vivid sensibility than she had ex-

perienced for forty-eight hours past, that the door of the chamber was opened—and again did the undertaker and three or four of his men enter the apartment. They bore something with them, too—something heavy and also hollow—something that knocked against the wood-work of the doorway as they brought it in—something ominous and dread to think of! Yes—just heaven! it was the damsel's coffin that they brought.

Her coffin!—but she is not dead—the light burns in her soul, although it ceases to shine forth to the view of the world: the lamp is not extinguished—the oil of life is not exhausted. Then wherefore seize upon her now?—wherefore carry her away from the midst of the world to which she belongs, to consign her to the raw damp solitude of the grave? Oh! it is because she is believed to be dead—and thus as a corpse she is to be treated. Now to her mind rush the many things she has heard in her life relative to people being buried alive—of coffins being opened years after the interment, and the wretched inmates being found to have turned on their sides or their faces, or to have gnawed their own flesh for sustenance: and now, just heaven! was such to be her fate?

Speaking of sustenance, reminds us to observe that though several days had elapsed since food had passed Ariadne's lips, yet that she experienced neither hunger nor thirst—no, nor yet that sinking at the stomach which is usually felt through want of nourishment. All vital actions of the system were suspended or suppressed in a physical sense: the body seemed to be dead—all its wants and necessities dead likewise;—and yet all the senses, how keenly were they alive!

Yes—the coffin was brought in and deposited upon the floor. The undertaker and his men then lifted the shell from the tressels, and placed it inside the coffin: they then raised the coffin itself upon the tressels, leaving the lid loosely lying on the top. Scarcely was this done when the door opened again; and the housekeeper entered. Ariadne knew by the rattling of the glasses that the servitors of death were about to regale themselves once more with spirits. Such was the case: but this time the tray was not placed upon the toilette-table—nor on a chair—nor on the bed—nor yet on the chest of drawers—no, nor on any article of furniture in the chamber; but upon the coffin-lid itself! And then the undertaker and his men, together with the housekeeper, all stood round that coffin and drank the spirits which were poured out.

"Well, Mr. Stimson, how do you think the corpse looks now?" asked the housekeeper.

"Unchanged and fresh as ever, ma'am," was the response. "I never did see such a beautiful corpse in all my life. We'll leave the coffin-lid off till the last moment, because the body's so fresh. If we screwed it down, it would precious soon begin to decompose."

Decompose! good heavens, to talk of this in the hearing of one who was not yet dead!

"Well now, the funeral's for the day after to-morrow, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon," observed the housekeeper; "and Sir Douglas Huntingdon has told me that he means to attend—so does the Marquis, out of respect for Sir Douglas."

"Well," replied Stimson, "we shall have two mourning coaches—one for his lordship and the Baronet, and t'other for me and three of my men to look like mourners and make the funeral respectable. I always choose the most sorrowful-looking of my people to go with me in a mourning-coach; and it has a wery good effect. But last time—that was about a month ago—one on 'em tumbled into the grave when we got to the churchyard, 'cause why he got blazing drunk."

"Well, we mustn't have any drunkenness *here*, Mr. Stimson," said the housekeeper, in an authoritative tone: "the Marquis would be in a frightful way if you didn't all keep perfectly sober."

Here the colloquy ended—the liquor was disposed of—the party of death's servitors, together with the housekeeper, retired—and Ariadne was now alone.

Alone—in her coffin!

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE COFFIN.

It was the morning of the funeral. The blinds were drawn down throughout the front of the mansion: but no mutes appeared at the door, the obsequies being merely *respectable* and not *fashionable*.

From the period of being placed in her coffin, Ariadne had known but a few minutes of consciousness up to about ten o'clock on the morning of which we are now writing: and then she was awakened as it were from a profound sleep by hearing a strange noise. Gradually did consciousness resume its sway in her soul,—that consciousness which, every time it returned after an interval of stupor, was accompanied by so many harrowing memories—so many poignant reminiscences. But on the present occasion Ariadne was longer than usual in collecting her ideas and marshalling her confused thoughts so as to arrive at the comprehension of the full horror of her position. Indeed, at first she could not possibly conjecture what that strange noise might be—a noise which nevertheless grated so ominously in her ears and jarred against every chord in her heart! It was a fearful noise—a sound well calculated to inspire dread horror even before its full meaning was comprehended. But when the damsel's thoughts settled down into the proper cells of her mind—when her ideas became so disciplined as to take a consecutive order in her memory—then did the chain of her recollections lead her on to the comprehension of this hideous noise that was grating and jarring close by her ears,—and she felt—she knew—she understood that she was being screwed down in her coffin!

Let it not be thought that during the many intervals of consciousness which Ariadne had experienced, from the first moment of her seeming death until the present time,—let it not be thought, we say, that she had forgotten to appeal to that Almighty Being in whom she put her faith. Far from it: all her thoughts during those intervals were a homage to the Deity and were interwoven with a train of reflections constituting a worship. For she had faith—the sublimest faith in the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of the Almighty; and thus was it that occasionally, as we have be-

fore stated, she experienced a gleam of hope—thus was it also that she had been led to dream of heaven. It was not because she experienced bitter, burning moments of agony, excruciating intervals of horror, and fits of the blackest despair,—it was not because she thus felt all the weaknesses of human nature generally and of her own sex in particular, that the reader must suppose she did not pray or that she did not maintain her faith in heaven. She *had* prayed—and she prayed now: in her soul did she pray deeply and fervently while the hideous noise of the coffin-screws grated upon her ears as they secured that lid which now seemed the barrier between herself and all earthly hope!

Her mind still retained a vivid clearness. She could think calmly, collectedly upon the past—upon the awful present—and upon that future in which she put her faith. She hoped that her spirit would soon leave its mortal habitation and fly to those eternal realms whereof she had a glimpse in her dreams. But as yet, although the coffin-lid was screwed down, she experienced no sense of suffocation—doubtless because the faculty of breathing was suspended in that state of asphyxia wherein she was wrapped. But it was from the coming scenes of the tremendous drama that her soul now recoiled so shudderingly,—the lowering into the grave—the shovelling in of the earth—and then the remaining in the clayey depth, perhaps to linger for days and days——Oh! this was the horror, the agony, the anguish!

But while these thoughts were fastening their gnawing vulture-talons upon her brain, the door of the chamber opened, and she almost immediately heard the voices of the Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Yes—through the coffin—through the shell—through the cerements, penetrated those voices; and *one* sank down—deep down—into her heart!

"Who will accompany us?" inquired Huntingdon, his voice made tremulous with a profound sorrow.

"I know of no one besides yourself and me who can attend as mourners," returned the Marquis. "For appearance' sake, the undertaker and some of his men will follow in a second coach——"

"Appearance' sake!" said the Baronet, bitterly. "But no matter—it must be so. And now, if everything be in readiness——"

Here Ariadne's senses began to fail her—the stupor returned—and she heard no more.

But scarcely had oblivion thus poured its opiate-balm into her soul, when the door of the apartment was opened hurriedly, and a servant made his appearance, saying to the Marquis, "My lord, a young man desires to see either yourself or Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately. He wanted to come up—but I would not let him——"

"Ah! it is no doubt Theodore," interrupted the Baronet.

"What! the brother," murmured the Marquis: then seizing the Baronet forcibly by the arm, he said in a low but rapid and earnest tone, "You will not compromise me—you have promised not to compromise me——"

"No, no," interrupted the Baronet, impatiently: then turning to the domestic, he said, "Let the young man come up."

The servant withdrew; and in less than half a minute the door opened again, and a genteel, good-looking, but careworn and emaciated young man made his appearance. But the moment all the dread emblems of death—the coffin on the trestels—the undertaker and his men creeping about like black snakes, as they prepared the cloaks, put on the hat-bands, and looked out the gloves,—in fine, as all the sombre features of the scene were embraced by that young man at a glance, he staggered against the door-post, and a deep convulsing sob denoted the fulness of his mental agony.

"Mr. Varian, I presume?" said the Baronet, advancing and taking the young man's hand.

"And you are Sir Douglas Huntingdon?" was the tremulous and indeed broken response: but although Theodore could say no more at the instant, yet he pressed the Baronet's hand in token of ineffable gratitude.

"It is a melancholy scene for you, Mr. Varian," continued Sir Douglas; "but you must bear up with becoming fortitude against this affliction."

"Oh! that I had been here in time to fling one last look upon her sweet face—to imprint one last kiss upon her forehead!" murmured Theodore, clasping his hands and sobbing convulsively. "It would not bring her back to life—it would not restore to me my dearly beloved sister: but nevertheless, it would be a satisfaction—a melancholy, mournful satisfaction——"

"Do you really wish it, Mr. Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, deeply moved by the young man's almost heartbroken anguish.

"I do, I do," he answered eagerly. "You know not, sir, how fondly—how devotedly I have loved that dear sister of mine. Ah! sir, it was for her sake that I fell into the ways of error——But let that pass!" he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself as he was reminded by the Baronet's look that there were many strangers in the room; and although they of course knew who he was, since his name had been mentioned on his entrance, yet it was by no means necessary to enlighten them as to all the details of the past.

"Your wish shall be attended to, Mr. Varian," said the Baronet. "It is but reasonable—it is but just; and moreover, it will not detain the funeral procession many minutes:"—then, turning to the undertaker, he said, "Remove that coffin-lid once more—this gentleman is the brother of the deceased."

Mr. Stimson and his men immediately set to work to obey the command they had just received; and in a few minutes the lid of the coffin was lifted away. Theodore Varian then approached, with that species of hesitation and reluctance which characterizes the first glance which a loving one bestows upon the beloved dead: but on reaching the head of the coffin, he stood gazing down fixedly and mournfully upon the beautiful countenance of his sister. Sir Douglas Huntingdon also approached and contemplated the pale wax-like face of Ariadne; and at this moment, doubtless under the influence of the fresh air, the stupor abandoned her again and consciousness returned.

"Behold your sister, Mr. Varian," murmured Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a trembling voice: "how little is she changed, although in death!"

"She looks as if she only slept," returned Theodore, his own voice more tremulous still. "Alas, alas, poor sister! beautiful wast thou in life—beau-

tiful art thou in death: and now thy soul is in heaven!"

Ariadne heard the two voices—the voice of the Baronet and the voice of her brother; and her ear lost not a single syllable that either voice thus uttered. But now those voices ceased, and were succeeded by the stifled sobs that proclaimed all the bitterness of Theodore's anguish. Heavens! would no revulsion now take place in the conditions of her being? Yes—she felt a quivering at the heart—such a sensation as she had not hitherto experienced throughout her trance; and almost at the same instant her brother exclaimed in a tone wild with mingled hope and fear, "Good heavens! her lips moved!"

"Alas, no!" said the Baronet: "it was but the fitful play of a sunbeam through the opening in the window curtain."

"No, no!" cried Varian, in a tone of the most passionate and fervid exultation: "it is no dream—no delusion——There, behold it now!"

"Almighty powers! it is so," exclaimed the Baronet. "She lives—she lives!"

All was now the most extraordinary confusion and excitement in that chamber. Ariadne was lifted out of the shell and placed upon the couch,—a quivering of the lips and a faint, or rather scarcely audible gasping, now being the unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. The undertaker and his men were hurried out of the room with the paraphernalia of death: Lady Ernestina and the housekeeper were summoned thither:—and Sir Douglas Huntingdon himself sped away to fetch Doctor Copperas. Fortunately the physician was at home at the moment; but scarcely had the Baronet explained to him in a few hurried words the resuscitation of Ariadne, when he exclaimed, "I will hurry off to Leveson House at once: but do you proceed to May Fair and fetch that truly eminent man, Doctor Thurston."

Away sped Doctor Copperas in one direction and the Baronet in another. Doctor Thurston was at home: and on being informed by Sir Douglas of what had occurred, he said, "Most fortunate is it that Doctor Copperas has hastened to take the case in hand. There is not another man in England who has such experience in occurrences of suspended animation."

While thus speaking, Doctor Thurston put on his hat and gloves, and accompanied the Baronet to Leveson House, where in the meantime Ariadne had returned to complete consciousness. We need hardly say that the scene which then took place, between the brother and sister thus reunited under such extraordinary circumstances, was touching in the extreme. Theodore strained Ariadne to his breast and covered her with the tenderest caresses. Ernestina and the housekeeper, fearful that some explanation might take place on the part of the damsel relative to the treatment she had received at the mansion, besought Theodore to withdraw, alleging as the reason that this prolonged excitement on the part of Ariadne might be followed by a relapse. But when the young girl beheld the housekeeper at her bedside and caught a glimpse of the Marquis of Leveson at the other extremity of the room, she clung tenaciously to her brother's neck, murmuring in low and broken accents, "Do not go, dearest Theodore—do not leave me—Oh! do not leave me again, I beseech you!"

The brother saw by the affrighted manner in which her azure eyes swept their looks around, that she was in dread of those present; and it instantaneously flashed to his mind that she had perchance experienced some foul play, and that he was not as yet acquainted with *all* the circumstances of her supposed death. Indeed, when first informed, through the medium of the Baronet's letter, that his sister had died beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson, vague and undefined suspicions of evil had sprung up in his imagination; for the name of *Leveson* was known to him as that of a nobleman much addicted to pleasure. This suspicion now appeared to receive confirmation from Ariadne's affrighted manner: but it was not the moment and it was not the place for him to make inquiries into past circumstances. Indeed, he had scarcely time to breathe a few reassuring words in Ariadne's ear, when Doctor Copperas arrived.

The young maiden at once recognised the physician, and welcomed him as a friend. The housekeeper, observing that Ariadne viewed her with evident mistrust and aversion, stole out of the room; and the Marquis speedily followed her. Lady Ernestina however remained; and by at once adopting the kindest, most soothing, and the tenderest manner towards Ariadne, she made a favourable impression both upon the damsel and Theodore. In a short time Doctor Thurston arrived, accompanied by the Baronet; and as Ariadne almost immediately inquired of the latter concerning the excellent and kind-hearted Mrs. Barnes, he at once volunteered to go and fetch her. Ariadne expressed her joy and gratitude at the proposal: and Sir Douglas accordingly sallied forth again, while the medical men adopted such measures as their skill suggested to guard against a relapse on the part of the resuscitated maiden.

In about twenty minutes the Baronet returned with Mrs. Baines; and affecting to a degree was the meeting between that worthy woman and Ariadne. Indeed, Mrs. Baines declared her intention of remaining at Leveson House to act as the damsel's nurse until her complete restoration to health; and thus the now happy girl found herself the object of the kindest attentions and surrounded by friendly faces.

But in the meantime the Marquis of Leveson and his own housekeeper were seriously alarmed lest Theodore Varian should learn sufficient from his sister's lips to induce him to make an exposure of their infamous treatment towards her. Sir Douglas Huntingdon, however, presently sought an opportunity of speaking to the Marquis upon the subject.

"Ariadne is now past all danger of a relapse," he said. "The physicians have left her for the present; and she remains in the care of my housekeeper, Mrs. Baines. Of course the chamber which she occupies in your house must be her home until her health will permit her removal elsewhere. Her brother is now about to accompany me to my hotel, that we may have some conversation together. He already suspects that his sister has experienced ill-treatment of some kind: and therefore it is my intention to tell him all the truth at once. But I trust that by my earnest

commendation he will be induced to pass over, if not actually to forgive or forget, your conduct towards his sister. Exposure will benefit no one; and innocent though she be, would nevertheless wound the delicacy of Miss Varian herself. Her brother will doubtless admit the justice of this reasoning; and therefore I do not think that you need labour under any apprehension of his vengeance."

"I thank you much—most sincerely—for these assurances," said the Marquis. "Pray make my peace with the young man; and tell him that if a few hundred pounds will be of any service——"

"I am very much mistaken," interrupted the Baronet, with ill-concealed disgust, "if Theodore Varian be not quite a different person——"

"Well, well, there's no harm in mentioning the money matter," said the Marquis, painfully anxious to avoid exposure on any terms; for he knew full well that if it became noised abroad that his house contained such auxiliaries to his sensuality as the mechanical chairs, the indignation of the populace would be so excited that his life would not be safe. "But you and I, Huntingdon," he added,—"on what terms are we to remain in future?"

"Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a tone that was rather sorrowful than angry, "I am not enough of a saint myself to enable me to take up stones to cast at you: but at the same time I think that there are extremes into which it is possible to plunge in the gratification of one's passions—and deep into those extremes have you been hurried."

With these words the Baronet turned away; and quitting the room, he joined Theodore Varian, who was waiting for him in the hall. The two left the house together—the young man feeling fully satisfied that in Mrs. Baines his sister had a tender nurse as well as a careful guardian and a true friend.

As for Mr. Stimson—he and his men, amidst wonder and amazement at the resuscitation, bore away all the paraphernalia of death: but as the bill was promptly paid by Lord Leveson, the undertaker found nothing to complain of.

And now, ere closing this chapter, we must state that Dr. Copperas, on returning home, sate down to pen a detailed account of the case of resuscitation, in the course of which he declared "that his treatment of it was materially assisted by the advice of that truly remarkable man, Doctor Thurston:" while, on the other hand, Doctor Thurston likewise sate down to pen *his* narrative, which he interlarded with many compliments to "that ornament of his profession, Doctor Copperas." These statements appeared respectively in the next Numbers of the *Scalpel* and the *Splint*, and created a marvellous sensation throughout the medical world.

CHAPTER XC.

MOTHER FRANKLIN.

It will be remembered that the Hangman and Bencull had resolved, after due consultation, to make away with the formidable Bow Street officer, Mr. Lawrence Sampson. Their project was to entice him, by some means or another, down to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, where three or four of the gang would lie in readiness to put the murderous scheme into execution; while the Hangman himself was to call at Larry's house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the Police-Book. With a view to the effectual carrying out of this plan, Nell Gibson had been selected as the most fitting instrument of the plotters; and at the same time the Buttoner had been appointed as a spy upon her actions.

It was necessary to remind the reader of these particulars: and we must add that although the Hangman's gang subsequently discovered certain proofs of what they believed to be Nell Gibson's treachery towards them in respect to their dealings with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, they had agreed, after calm deliberation, to conceal their knowledge of the young woman's additional perfidy in respect to the note which had been intercepted by the Buttoner. To that resolve they had come, as we described at the time, with a view to ascertain whether she were also betraying them with respect to the plot initiated in reference to Larry Sampson.

It was now a week since the memorable night of the fire; and if, at about six o'clock in the evening, we peep into Mr. Lawrence Sampson's comfortable parlour at his house in Long Acre, we shall behold him sitting by the fire reading a book and discussing a glass of wine. Presently the door opened; and his housekeeper, Dame Margery, came to announce that a very old woman, who refused to give her name, wished to speak to him. The Bow Street Officer, who never refused to see any body on business, at once desired that she should be admitted: and accordingly the visitant was shown into his presence.

Dame Margery withdrew; and Larry Sampson instantaneously recognised the old harridan, who, bent double with age, now advanced towards him, shaking her head and wagging her toothless jaws with a horrible kind of mysterious significancy.

"Do you know who I be?" she asked, in a voice something between a cackle and a squeak.

"Yes—to be sure," responded Larry: "you are Mother Franklin—and you live over at Mrs. Young's in Bermondsey. Now then, what do you want with me."

"Ah! I thought as how you would know who I was," said the old woman, with a merry laugh, which nevertheless struck hideous upon the ear. "You know every body, Mr. Sampson—and every body knows you."

Thus speaking, Mother Franklin took from her pocket a round snuff-box with an indecent picture upon the lid; and while regaling herself with a pinch, some of the snuff got into her throat, thereby exciting so painful a cough that it seemed as if the old hag was about to choke, while the scalding rheum poured down her wrinkled cheeks, leaving her eyes horribly red and bleared. She was wrapped in an old dingy red cloak, with the hood drawn over her head; and she walked with a stick. Her whole appearance was therefore not unlike that of one of the lowest and most wretched class of vagabond fortune-tellers: and now, as she stood shaking from head to foot with that prolonged hacking cough, Larry Sampson could scarcely avoid turning away from her in disgust.

"Well, what is it you want with me?" he inquired again, after a sufficient pause to allow the harridan

to recover from the effects of the snuff getting into her throat.

"I can do you a service, Mr. Sampson," she said, now taking a seat: "a werry great service too, I can assure you."

"But it is doubtless to do yourself a service at the same time, Mother Franklin," observed Larry; "or else you would not come to me. Therefore pray get to the point at once, and tell me what you want."

"There's a plot agin you, Mr. Sampson—a deep-laid plot," said the old woman, looking at him significantly with her bleared eyes: "and if you don't mind, it will be the wuss for you—that it will!"

"Ah! I am constantly hearing of plots and schemes against me," observed the Bow Street officer, with an air of indifference: "but you see I survive them all. However, if you have really anything to tell me, do it quickly—describe your motives in thus putting me on my guard, and also say what reward you expect."

"The reward I shall leave to you, Mr. Sampson," replied the old harridan; "for I know you will treat me well. I shall be eighty-nine come next Feviverry; and that's a age which you won't treat with disrespect. But I say now, hasn't that Gibson gal been three or four times with you?"

"Just so," replied Sampson. "What then?"

"She's playing you false, sir," resumed Mother Franklin: "it's all a plant of the Hangman's and Bencull's, I can promise you."

"I had my suspicions, I can assure you," observed Sampson, with his habitual coolness. "Go on."

"I'll tell you all—but it will be best to begin at the beginning. Well, sir, one day the Hangman called at your house—this werry house, I mean," continued the old hag; "and somehow or another

he managed to get into a secret room of your's where there's a many dresses—and he also saw a great big book that you've got and where you write down everything that happens. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, shaking her head significantly; "you see *I* know something worth *your* knowing—and you also see, by the same token, that I am telling the truth. Well, in that great book the Hangman read a many things, and all about your dressing up yourself as a knife-grinder and going down to Folly Bridges—that's Jacob's Island, you know—and getting chucked into the ditch. So, you see, the Hangman found out that you know a good deal too much to suit him and [illegible] gang; and so he has planted Nell [illegible] you to 'tice you down to the dark cr[illegible] be done for: and at the same time [illegible] means to come here to your house a[illegible] the great book, so that it mayn't sa[illegible] of any other Bow Street runner."

Larry Sampson certainly was [illegible] being prepared for all this inform[illegible] outwardly manifested no surprise. [illegible] however really was, to hear that Dan[illegible] managed to obtain admission to his [illegible] ber: but what he was now told in [illegible] Gibson, only confirmed certain sus[illegible] he had previously entertained relat[illegible] port of three or four visits which [illegible] him.

"Now, Mrs. Franklin," he said, "[illegible] are telling me the truth; and here's [illegible] for you," added Larry, counting the [illegible] down upon the table. "The next thi[illegible] do is to let me know how you happened [illegible] all that is going on, and why you now [illegible] betray the matter to me. Do this, a[illegible] have another ten guineas upon the spo[illegible]

For years and years past, the wag[illegible] had not been so abundant at any one [illegible] Mother Franklin, as the harvest which [illegible] now reaping; and with a chuckle of de[illegible] secured the first ten guineas about h[illegible] and then proceeded to give those explanations that should ensure to her the second two guineas.

"Well, Mr. Sampson," she said, "the truth is that Nell Gibson has always been harsh and bitter towards me; and I hate her—I have long hated her. Then the Hangman, too—he jeered, and taunted, and laughed at me one night; and I swore to be revenged—for I hate him also. So, seeing that he had something secret to say to Nell Gibson, I listened at the door. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, with her hideous cackle: "my ears were sharp enough *then*, I can tell you; and as luck would have it, no one disturbed me in the passage all the time I was listening at the door. So I heard everything that passed: that's how I came to know what was going on. Ever since—for this was more than three weeks ago—just at the beginning of November—ever since then, I say, I have listened, and watched, and peeped, and peered, at all that was going on; and what with catching a word now and a word then, and hearing a bit of a whispered conversation at one time and a bit at another, I found out that the plot was still going on agin you—that Nell Gibson has been to you several times with a rigmarole tale—and that she fancies you are quite falling into the snare. Well, Mr. Sampson, she's coming up to you to-night; and so I managed to get away for a couple of hours on some excuse, just to give you this warning. But if you want again to know why I do it, it is because I hate the Hangman—I hate Nell Gibson also. *She* has called me a witch—and *he* has called me a beldame; and *she* threatened to leave Mother Young's establishment if I didn't hold my tongue—and *he* tossed me a shilling—a beggarly shilling—as if I was a beggar! And so for all this," shrieked forth the hag, raising her voice in a horrible excitement, "I want revenge—I want revenge—and now I shall get it!"

[illegible] Douglas [illegible]ous tone to which her ac[illegible] agreed, after calm deli[illegible] merged into a cough, so [illegible] that it almost seemed to [illegible] knowledge of the young [illegible] to pieces: and a horrible [illegible] fidy in respect to the no[illegible] her toothless jaws wagging, [illegible] cepted by the Buttoner. [illegible] he scalding rheum pouring [illegible] come, as we described at [illegible] ascertain whether she w[illegible] with respect to the plot [illegible] u into a many secrets if I [illegible] Larry Sampson. [illegible] man, and Nell Gibson, and [illegible]

It was now a week sinc[illegible] cious gang," continued the [illegible] the fire; and if, at about [illegible] soon too—for they've all [illegible] ing, we peep into Mr. L[illegible] iting me just because I am [illegible] fortable parlour at his l[illegible] t will be eighty-nine come [illegible] shall behold him sitting b[illegible] ere's one thing I'll tell you, [illegible] and discussing a glass [illegible] mind and never say that [illegible] door opened; and his ho[illegible] my lips, or that I peached [illegible] gery, came to announce [illegible] who refused to give her n[illegible] stood thing between you [illegible] him. The Bow Street Of[illegible] mpson. "Proceed, Mrs. [illegible] to see any body on busin[illegible] were about to tell me." [illegible] she should be admitted: [illegible] hed, "from a conversation [illegible] tant was shown into his p[illegible] ms that it was the Hang[illegible] Dame Margery withdr[illegible] ed the fire at some Baro[illegible] instantaneously recogni[illegible] Huntingdon's, you mean," [illegible] bent double with age, no[illegible] But how was that?" [illegible] shaking her head and wa[illegible] with a horrible kind of m[illegible] old hag, "the fellows got [illegible]

"Do you know who I [illegible] e intention of breaking into [illegible] something between a ca[illegible] ouse; but somehow or an[illegible]

"Yes—to be sure," re[illegible] oke, and the light falling on [illegible] Mother Franklin—a[illegible] coarse hay or straw, set the whole place into a blaze. Ha! ha! all their wickedness shall come out soon; I'll unmask them, the villains—I will!" she cried, again exalting her voice into a querulous thrill. "But I can't stay any longer now. I must get back as soon as possible. Another time I'll tell you more. At all events, I've told you enow for the present to put you on your guard against your enemies, Mr. Sampson."

Having thus spoken, the harridan received the second ten guineas, and took her departure mumbling to herself, "Ha! now I shall be revenged. Daniel Coffin said he should have the satisfaction of tucking me up before he died; but I shall have the pleasure of seeing him swing to the gallows-tree—ha! ha! ha!"

About an hour afterwards Nell Gibson was ushered by Dame Margery into the presence of the Bow Street Officer.

"Well, it is for to-night," said the young woman, the moment the housekeeper had retired and she found herself alone with Larry Sampson.

"Ah! it is for to-night, eh?" he said, affecting to fall most credulously into the snare spread to enmesh him. "And where is the conference to take place?"

"Down at Bencull's dark crib," replied Nell

Gibson, fixing a searching glance upon Sampson so as to penetrate into the depths of his soul and thus assure herself that he really suspected nothing.

"Now, let us understand the whole thing thoroughly, so that there may be no mistake," he observed, motioning Nell Gibson to take a seat and handing her a glass of wine. "According to what you have previously told me, the Hangman's gang contemplate some desperate and astounding deed of villany, the nature of which is however unknown to you. They have already had two or three consultations, from which you have been excluded; and now to-night the last consultation is to be held, to settle the whole plan and arrange all the proceedings. Is not this it?"

"That is exactly how the matter stands, Mr. Sampson," replied Nell Gibson.

"Well, then," resumed the Officer "you must now tell me all over again exactly what you propose; because having a great many different things to think of, I may not perhaps exactly remember all you have said to me at our previous interviews."

"I can explain myself over again in a very few words," said Nell Gibson. "You must understand that at the back of the dark crib there is a sort of gallery, overlooking the ditch——"

"Yes—and overhanging it also," interrupted Sampson. "After you came to me on the first occasion, I went down to the Folly Bridges and took a survey of the place. Of course I had often been there before; but after what you told me I thought it best to get an accurate idea of the locality. And now please to continue your explanations."

"Since you have been down to the place to look at it so particularly," resumed Nell, "you may have noticed that if you get on the wooden bridge you can easily climb along to the gallery at the back of the dark crib; and there you can lie concealed, listening at the window to all that takes place inside the back room."

"Well, the plan is feasible enough," observed Sampson, steadily and composedly meeting the keen and penetrating look which Nell Gibson fixed upon him from beneath her eyelids; and thus while she fancied that he did not perceive how intently though furtively she was watching him, he not only saw that he was thus scrutinised, but also encountered the scrutiny without exciting a suspicion. "And how many do you think will be there to-night?" he inquired.

"Ah! there will be several of them," answered Nell Gibson: "for the best part of the gang are in this business; and that's the reason why I know it must be something of the utmost importance."

"And have you failed to wheedle the secret out of the Buttoner? for he is your fancy man, I believe," said Larry Sampson.

"The Buttoner is as close as the door of Newgate and as dumb as the knocker itself," replied Nell. "When he was drunk I have tried to pump him; but it was all no go. Besides which, the Buttoner never will trust a woman; and so if he did tell me anything, it couldn't be relied on as true—it would only be some invention of his to put me on a wrong scent. But I know that whatever the business now in hand may be, there's murder in it—and also the hope of an immense booty——"

"And how do you know this?" inquired Sampson.

"Because the Buttoner cleaned up his pistols this morning, and sharpened the blade of a hideous clasp-knife that he's got. He didn't think I paid particular attention to what he was doing; but I did though. Moreover, I dropped in, quite in a leisurely way, at the dark crib this afternoon; and I saw Bencull busy examining his pistols also. The Mushroom Faker arrived at the dark crib last night, and brought his pistols with him—and I heard him say in an under-tone to Bencull something about its being very probable that they should soon have more money than they would possibly know what to do with."

"But could not you by some means or another secrete yourself in the gallery behind the dark crib and hear what is going on to-night?" asked Sampson, raising a sort of objection merely to prevent Nell Gibson from thinking that he fell too readily into the snare.

"If I could, you may depend upon it I would," she answered: "but it's impossible. I must get back now as quick as I can to Mother Young's; and I shan't be able to stir out again all the evening. No, Mr. Sampson—this is a thing that you must take in hand yourself and remember that when I first came to you, our solemn understanding was that whatever took place between us was not to be communicated to a third person. But I must be off now," she exclaimed, rising from her seat as she heard a clock in another room striking eight.

"But I have not yet given you any portion of the reward that you stipulated for," observed Sampson.

"I will come for it when the business is over," said Nell Gibson. "Besides, the best and most welcome reward that I can have, is to revenge myself for the ill-treatment of the Buttoner—the insulting taunts of the Hangman, because I refused to submit to his wishes—and the coarse brutality of that detestable Bencull. In fact, Mr. Sampson, as I have told you before, I have a thousand wrongs to avenge against those villains; and now is the time."

"Yes—there shall be ample revenge for you, Miss Gibson," observed Larry. "Whatever these fellows plot and plan to-night, shall send them all to the scaffold. But what time will they be assembled in their ruffian conclave?"

"At about eleven o'clock," returned Nell. "If you secrete yourself in the gallery at that hour, it will be ample time."

"And you are certain that there is no danger of any of the fellows going out into that gallery?"

"Not a bit of it," responded Nell Gibson: "you will not incur the slightest peril."

The young woman then took her departure: and when she was gone, Larry Sampson thought within himself, "The plot is a clumsy one; and even without Mother Franklin's warning, I should not have fallen very readily into the snare. But that Nell Gibson is a clever and a cunning girl, and performs her part well. However, she and her comrades will all be astonished at the lesson I shall read them to-night."

The Bow Street Officer then resumed the perusal

of his book with as much calmness and composure as if nothing extraordinary were on the *tapis*: but at about half-past nine o'clock he prepared to sally forth,—having previously, however, given some special instructions to his housekeeper relative to the mode in which *a certain person* was to be received during his absence.

Meantime the Hangman, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker, were all assembled at the dark crib in company with Bencull. This precious company were seated in that same room at the back to which our readers have been previously introduced; and the table was as usual covered with the materials for drinking and smoking—or, as the men themselves expressed it, "a regular booze."

"Well, do you still think your blowen is staunch in this matter?" asked the Hangman, addressing himself to the Buttoner.

"I have no reason as yet to think otherwise," was the response. "But of course, after the tricks she has already played us, it is impossible to say. She ought to be back by this time; and then we shall see what she says."

"And if she did mean to betray us in any way, how should we know it?" asked Bencull.

"She can't betray us into Sampson's power for anything particular we are doing at this moment," observed the Hangman. "All the harm she can do, is to put him up to snuff respecting our intentions towards him; and in that case of course he won't come down and hide himself in the gallery."

At this moment a knock was heard at the street-door; and Bencull, hastening to answer the summons, gave admittance to Nell Gibson. The young woman entered the back room with her wonted calmness and self-possession. Indeed, there was no reason why she should look or feel otherwise; inasmuch as so far from contemplating any treachery in the present instance, she had faithfully and as she believed, *successfully*, performed her part in the drama now in progress.

"It is all right," she said, taking a seat next to the Buttoner. "Larry Sampson, having nibbled at the bait for the last three weeks, has now swallowed it completely; and he will be in that gallery at eleven o'clock to-night."

"And you don't think he suspects anything, Nell?" said the Hangman inquiringly, as he looked at her intently from beneath his overhanging brows.

"I am sure he does not," she answered, with perfect composure. "Or if he does, then is he the greatest adept at concealing his thoughts that I ever saw in all my life."

"Well, of course, he is all that," growled Bencull; "but I should have thought that you was more experter still, Miss Nell, and so you might have seen whether he took it all in for gospel or not."

"Again I tell you," said the young woman, now speaking somewhat impetuously, "that as far as I could possibly judge, Larry Sampson believed I was performing a real part. But I suppose that after what occurred on Shooters' Hill, you mean to suspect everything I do, and every word I speak? Now, then, I tell you again, and for the last time, that you are wrong! I tried to save Huntingdon because he was the first man—in fact the only man I ever loved: and what I did the other night I would do over again; for I wouldn't have a hair of his head injured. But in other matters I would die sooner than betray you—yes, by God! I would die first."

And having worked herself up to a pitch of powerful excitement, she struck her clenched hand so forcibly upon the table that bottles and glasses and tobacco-pipes all danced and rattled as if the floor of the room was upheaving with an earthquake.

"Come now, Nell, none of this nonsense," said the Buttoner: "we ain't suspecting you at the present moment. In fact han't we promised to look over what you did t'other night on Shooters' Hill, if so be we saw that you proved faithful in the little business now in hand?"

"Well, and you *will* see too," returned Nell Gibson sulkily. "But I suppose you don't want me to wait any longer?"

"No," replied the Buttoner: "you can be off and get back to Mother Young's. There's enough of us here to do the business without you. But here—take a drop of summut short first:"—and he handed her a glass of spirits.

"Well, here's success to you," said Nell, her good humour returning—and she tossed off the burning alcohol: then replacing the glass on the table, she took her departure.

"I raly don't know what to make of that gal," said the Buttoner after a brief pause. "I have been her flash man for the last three weeks, and can't understand her yet."

"She's as deep and artful as the devil," said Bencull, "and that's why I first of all recommended her in this job. But if so be she should turn her artifice against us——"

"Then, by Satan! she shall suffer for it," exclaimed the Hangman, rising from his seat and buttoning up his coat.

"Aye, that she should," said the Mushroom Faker.

"And I would help to do for her," added Bob the Durrynacker.

"Well, we shall know more about it presently, I dare say," observed the Hangman. "And now I am off up to Long Acre to call at Larry's and see if I can get hold of the police book. I hope when I come back in two or three hours or so," he added, with a look ominously ferocious, "I shall hear that Larry Sampson is deep down at the bottom of the ditch."

Then jerking his thumb significantly over his shoulder towards the window, the Hangman put on his hat and quitted the room.

Bencull, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker now remained together at the dark crib, smoking and drinking, and conversing on the business which they had in hand. Once or twice Bencull went out to the street door, to ascertain, as he expressed himself, "what sort of a night it was;" and returning on each occasion to his companions to report that the moon was coming out clearer and brighter, they with one accord regretted that it was not pitch dark, considering the enterprise they had in progress. For although none of the inhabitants of Jacob's Island might be supposed to be over particular, yet it was somewhat too serious an affair to have the eyes of neighbours catching a glimpse of any murderous proceeding by the aid of moonlight. But it is

risk must however be run; and the four ruffians made up their minds accordingly.

After repeated references to a huge silver watch which he carried in his fob, Mr. Bencull at last intimated that it was now eleven o'clock; and the Buttoner was just suggesting that they should wait another quarter of an hour before rushing out into the gallery, when a knock was heard at the street door.

"Who can that be?" said Bencull, in a tone of vexation. "Perhaps old Jeremy Humpage—or the Swag Chovey Bl>ak——"

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted the Buttoner, "he mustn't be let into our secrets. Tell him there's summut wery partickler and private going on——"

"Oh! leave me to make an excuse," growled Bencull; and taking up the light he went to the door.

But no pen can describe the mingled astonishment and dismay which seized upon him, when the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the countenance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson!

CHAPTER XCI.

THE RESULTS OF THE PLOT.

"Ah! Bencull, how are you?" said the Bow Street official, in an easy off-hand manner. "The fact is that I wanted to have a word or two with you, and thought this as good a time as any."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sampson unceremoniously entered the house—passed by Bencull—and proceeded straight to the room at the back. Bencull, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, hastily shut the door and followed close behind,—the light which he carried revealing the person of the new-comer to the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker. These individuals were as much astounded as the landlord of the place had been, on beholding the object of their murderous purpose thus familiarly and coolly appear before them. He was attired in his usual manner, and had his hands thrust into the depths of his capacious breeches' pockets.

Entering the room and throwing himself leisurely upon a chair, Mr. Sampson glanced around him with a peculiar smile, observing, "Well, there are no strange faces here. I have had the pleasure of being acquainted with every one of you for a long time past—personally at least, if not to speak to."

There was a slight accent of irony in his tone and a similar expression in his look; so that the four ruffians exchanged dubious and inquiring glances with each other, as much as to say, "What on earth does all this mean?" Indeed, they knew not what to think nor what to do; but with a sort of consternation upon them, they awaited in silence for Larry Sampson to explain himself farther.

"Now, my good friends," resumed the officer, pushing his chair back against the wall so that no one could get behind him, and then lounging in it with an easy and confident manner, as if he felt assured that though in the lion's den, he was perfectly safe;—"now, my good friends," he repeated, "don't you think that all your united wisdom—especially when combined with that of Daniel Coffin—should have devised some scheme more feasible and likely-looking than this clumsy affair which you have trumped up to ensnare me?"

"Trapped, by goles!" exclaimed Bencull, his countenance becoming black as thunder.

"Nosed upon, as sure as fate!" muttered the Mushroom Faker.

"Done brown!" added Bob the Durrynacker, also in an under-tone.

"Perdition seize that Nell Gibson!" murmured the Buttoner between his set teeth, as he clenched his hands with convulsive violence,—his mind being already intent on a horrible revenge for what he supposed to be the perfidy of his mistress.

"Need I tell you what ridiculous figures you cut?" resumed Larry Sampson, secretly enjoying their confusion: "but I only wish that your accomplice Nell Gibson was here to see how completely all her artifices have been penetrated by me. As for your friend the Hangman, I suppose he has gone up to my house in the hope of obtaining possession of my secret register. He will be miserably disappointed," added the officer drily.

"You are talking the Chinese langvidge, Mr Sampson," growled Bencull, endeavouring to put a good face on the matter, if possible. "We don't understand you: there ain't no plot—no scheme—no nothink——"

"Denial is useless, my good fellow," interrupted the officer. "You expected that I should be concealed in the gallery outside here at eleven o'clock: but instead of that, I thought it would be better to drop in as I have done, and tell you to beware in future how you plot against me. After the glimpse which the Hangman obtained of my secret book one day, he should have known that there are few things done in London which escape my knowledge: and perhaps you will be surprised when I tell you that the origin of the fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's House a week ago is known to me——"

"Then, by goles!" shouted Bencull, starting from his seat, "there's no doubt as to who——"

"No doubt at all!" exclaimed the Buttoner, dashing his clenched fist violently against the table.

"Patience, patience," said Larry Sampson, coolly. "I tell you that it is vain and useless for you to conjecture how I obtained my information. Every crime committed in London is known to me; and the authors of it are likewise known: but it doesn't always suit my purposes to bring them *at once* to justice:"—then fixing his eyes upon Bencull and the Buttoner, he said, "You two men and Daniel Coffin were the authors of that fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's! You forced an entrance into the stable with the intention of breaking into the dwelling-house; but the light fell from your lantern, and the place was soon in a blaze. Is this true? or is it not? Fools!" ejaculated Larry Sampson, contemptuously; "if such a mysterious circumstance as that is known to me in all its details, how do you think that this miserable clumsy murder-plot of your's could escape my knowledge?"

Bencull and the Buttoner now exchanged looks of gloomy alarm: for they felt persuaded that they were about to be apprehended on account of the burglary and fire at the Baronet's;—while the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker likewise fancied that such was to be their two comrades'

fate. Indeed all four villains made sure that the dark crib was surrounded by Sampson's runners; and for this reason they did not offer to lay a finger upon the formidable functionary himself.

"Although such a pack of hang-dog scoundrels as you," resumed Larry, "deserve no mercy at my hands, yet I do not mind putting you at your ease in one respect: and that is," he continued, addressing himself particularly to Bencull and the Buttoner, "I do *not* mean to take you two up, nor yet your friend the Hangman, for that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Not that I am over desirous to show you any leniency, but because I cannot make use of the evidence I have obtained to bring the deed home to you. So now," he added, "let me give you a word of warning—which is, that if you don't break up your gang, get out of London, and disperse over the country as quick as possible, I will hunt you all to the gibbet. Now I have given you fair warning: and I hope you will be wise enough to take it."

"And what's to prevent us from knocking you on the head and shoving you out into the ditch?" exclaimed the Buttoner, suddenly struck with the idea that if Larry Sampson had not come thither for the purpose of effecting any arrests, it was very probable he was unattended by his myrmidons.

"You will not attempt any such thing," answered Sampson coolly; "because in the first place I should shoot you through the head;"—and as he spoke he drew forth his hands from his capacious pockets, each hand being armed with a double-barrelled pistol. "Moreover," he continued, "if you just tap at that window, three or four of my men will rush in from the gallery: and at the first report of one of these pistols, half-a-dozen more of my runners will break into the house from the street. So now you are forewarned of the consequences of any attempt to molest me."

The Buttoner sank down upon his chair again in gloomy sullenness; and Bencull, lighting a pipe, puffed away with the air of a man who feels himself in unpleasant circumstances, but endeavours to appear as unconcerned as possible. As for the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, they tossed off frequent bumpers of spirits, doubtless to arm themselves with courage for any emergency that might ensue. But Mr. Sampson in reality seemed to have no inclination to push matters to the extreme on the present occasion; and replacing his pistols in his pocket he said, "Now, Mr. Bencull, I will thank you to go first and open your street-door for me."

The landlord of the dark crib was too well pleased at this command not to obey it with alacrity; and the Bow Street Officer issued forth from the den of infamy. Immediately upon emerging into Mill Street, he blew a whistle with a peculiar note of shrillness; and Bencull, keeping the door ajar in order to watch till the "enemy" had departed, perceived that this was the signal for the runners to leave the vicinage of the dark crib. Larry Sampson passed up the street; and one after the other Bencull counted no less than eight runners whom he recognised as they followed at short intervals. Then, when the coast was once more clear, he shut the door and returned to the room where his three companions had remained.

"Betrayed—basely betrayed!" he growled forth as he replaced the light on the table and flung himself upon the bench.

"Yes, and there's no doubt as to who's betrayed us," said the Buttoner. 'Nell Gibson alone could have peached about that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. I dare say instead of having gone back to Mother Young's, she's cut and bolted. But at all events I'll go and see."

"No, stay here, old feller," exclaimed Bencull: "let's do nothing hastily—for there's no telling how Larry may have his eye upon us. At all events let's see whether the Hangman comes back—and if so what he says."

This advice was adopted; and the four ruffians applied themselves with renewed energy to the spirits and tobacco, in order to cheer their minds after the scene that had just taken place, the particulars of which afforded them ample food for discussion till about half-past twelve o'clock, when the Hangman returned.

Bursting with the fury of his pent-up feelings, the diabolical nature of which was reflected upon his countenance, Daniel Coffin no sooner entered the little room than he demanded what had taken place. In a few hurried words the required explanations were given; and he in his turn was then called upon to describe how he had fared in Long Acre.

"By Satan! I scarcely know that I shall have patience enough to tell you," he exclaimed, his naturally hang-dog countenance suddenly assuming a look so truly diabolical that even his companions felt their blood run cold in their veins for a moment. "But however, let me try and compose myself to a task that is ten thousand times more unpleasant than tucking up a feller at the Old Bailey. Well, on reaching Long Acre a little after eleven, I knocked at Sampson's door, and Dame Margery—that's his old housekeeper, you know—almost immediately opened it. '*Pray, ma'am,*' says I, '*is Mr. Sampson at home?*' just for all the world as if I hadn't the least idea that he was out.—'*No, sir, he is not,*' says she in such a civil manner that I really thought the old girl didn't recollect who I was: but she speedily undeceived me on this point saying, '*I think you are Mr. Coffin, if I mistake not?*'—'*Well, ma'am,*' says I, '*Dan'el Coffin is my name for want of a better. But it's very provoking that Mr. Sampson is out; for I want to speak to him very particular.*'—'*I think he said he was going down to Jacob's Island,*' observes the old housekeeper; and you may be assured that I was deuced glad to hear this, because of course I felt certain that he had fallen into the trap.—'*Do you think he will be long, ma'am?*' says I.—'*I dare say a couple of hours,*' she answered: '*but can't you call back again? or else perhaps you will walk in and wait till he comes home?*'—'*Well, ma'am,*' says I, not appearing to catch too greedily at the offer, although it was just what I wanted, '*perhaps that's the best thing I can do.*'—'*Walk in, then, sir,*' says Dame Margery, so polite and civil and simpering I never saw anything like it: and so she showed me into the breakfast-parlour and there left me. I let about ten minutes elapse; and then thinking that the coast must be clear, I took a candle—stole out of the parlour—crept up the stairs—and was within half-a-dozen steps of the landing, when lo and behold! the light of the candle suddenly showed me three Bow-street runners sitting on the top step

each with a brace of pistols in his hands! You may easily suppose that I was taken so aback I didn't know what the deuce to do; while a voice seemed to whisper in my ears, '*You are betrayed! you are betrayed!*' The three runners burst out laughing; and one of them cried, '*Holloa, Dan'el! what are you doing here?*'—'*Why, I only walked up in a fit of absence of mind,*' says I, no better excuse coming into my head at the instant: '*but what are you doing here?*'—'*Oh! only mounting guard over the police-box, which somebody or another has vowed to possess himself of to-night. But of course such a respectable gentleman as you, Mr. Coffin, can't have come here for any such purpose:*' and then the three scoundrels burst out into such another horse-laugh that I could have killed them on the spot. In fact, I was more than half a mind to fall foul on them; but seeing that the game was all up with regard to Larry, and that whatever I might do would only put me deeper into his power, I pretended to put a good face on the matter and tried to laugh away my confusion. They didn't make any attempt to detain me; and so I wished them good night and got out of the house a precious deal quicker than I entered it. By Satan! I was never in such a precious rage in my life! I could have blown up the whole world with gunpowder if I had had a chance. I was actually boiling over with a passion that it hurt me to keep down. While hastening back here as quick as I could, a thousand strange thoughts entered my head. I fancied that I should find you all arrested, and that I was only suffered to go at large from Long Acre in order to be nabbed when returning either home to Fleet Lane, or else coming down here at the Folly Bridges. Then I thought that perhaps Larry only meant to make a joke of it after all. So what with some hesitation and a good deal of desperation, I resolved to come straight on here and learn what had taken place. But one thing was all the while uppermost in my mind—and this was, that Nell Gibson had betrayed us!"

"There's no doubt of it," exclaimed Bencull, savagely. "And now what's to be done?"

"What's to be done?" thundered the Hangman, starting from his seat and striking his fist with tremendous violence upon the table: "why, if we were all to hang for it to-morrow morning, Nell Gibson must die to-night!"—and as he glared round with his ferocious eyes upon his companions, he read assent in all their sinister countenances.

"That is to say," observed the Buttoner, "if we can find her: but my idea is that she's out and run."

"Not she," exclaimed the Hangman. "You don't even know the girl so well as I do. She's not one to bolt like a coward: what she does, she'll stand by. Besides, didn't you tell me that Larry spoke of her just as if she hadn't peached at all?"

"Yes," observed the Buttoner: "but that was his gammon. No one could have told him about the fire at the Baronet's except Nell Gibson: and therefore she put him up to our present plot also."

"I know all that very well," exclaimed the Hangman: "but what I mean is simple enough. There's no doubt that Nell Gibson has peached against us; and it's also clear that Larry has promised not to tell that he had his information from her. This is the reason why he didn't have us all taken up: because Nell Gibson's testimony could alone bring home the fire to three of us, and this night's plot to us all. Well then, since it's clear that Larry Sampson has been bound over to secrecy by Nell, she herself will fancy that she can brave it out before us. She is a bold girl—and I'll lay my life that she's neither run away nor even thought of it, but that you will find her at Mother Young's."

"Well, I'll go and see," said the Buttoner. "But if so be she won't come down here, what am I to do?"

"Knock her on the head at once," rejoined the Hangman brutally: "and then cut and run at all risks."

"Wery good," said the Buttoner: and forcing his hat down upon his head with an air of determination, he issued from the dark crib.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE MURDER.

It was now one o'clock in the morning: but Mrs. Young's establishment was not one of those where very good hours were kept; and on arriving there, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson and three or four other young women sitting up and drinking brandy together.

The instant the man thus made his appearance, Nell Gibson threw upon him a look of significant inquiry, as much as to ask what had been done and whether the plot had succeeded; for, as the reader will bear in mind, she was in reality very far from being the authoress of the betrayal of that plot to Larry Sampson; and she was therefore totally ignorant of all that had taken place since she left the dark crib three hours previously.

But the Buttoner of course fancied that this look of inquiry was only a pretence on Nell's part in order to avert suspicion from herself, or else defy it with a brazen face: and therefore putting on a good-humoured look, as if he did not suspect her at all, he beckoned her to come out of the room. The young woman had not the slightest reason to refuse; on the contrary, she was most anxious to learn what had taken place; and supposing that her flash man now summoned her away to converse somewhere else without the danger of being overheard, she unhesitatingly rose from her seat, threw on her bonnet and cloak, and prepared to accompany him.

In the passage they encountered Mother Franklin, who had evidently been paying her respects to a bottle of strong waters: for she was now reeling about in a horrible state of ebriety. A tipsy woman is at all times a shocking spectacle: but this old hag of nearly ninety, with her bleared eyes now red as if they were raw, her toothless jaws wagging as if with a palsy, and her cracked voice giving utterance to mingled imprecations and obscenities, was altogether one of the most hideous objects that can possibly be conceived.

"That drunken old witch had a holiday this evening," said Nell Gibson, who, accustomed though she was to behold female depravity at all ages and in all its varied phases, was nevertheless ineffably disgusted at the appearance of Mother Franklin. "Yes, she has had a holiday; and you see she has made the best of it."

"Ah! would you insult me?" yelled forth Mother

Franklin, applying a vile epithet to the young woman. "But never mind! I dare say——"

"What is that you are muttering to yourself, you wretch?" exclaimed Nell Gibson, turning round towards the old woman with eyes flashing fire.

"You'll know, you'll know soon enough," responded the harridan, still muttering in a scarcely audible tone as she reeled towards the staircase to ascend to her own chamber.

Nell Gibson turned in deep disgust away, and followed the Buttoner from the house.

"Now, what has happened?" she inquired, the moment they were in the street together.

"I mustn't tell yer till we get down to the dark crib," said the Buttoner: "and then you'll know all."

The tone in which he spoke was low, deep, and ominous; and therefore Nell Gibson naturally inferred that the deed had been done and that Larry Sampson was murdered. No misgiving as to anything else entered her mind; and not for a moment could she conceive that the plot had failed and that the most terrible suspicions existed against herself. That the Buttoner would not tell her more nor enter into the slightest particulars in the street, seemed but a proper precaution; and the only circumstance that struck her as being at all singular, was that she should be fetched down to the dark crib at that hour.

"What am I wanted for at Bencull's?" she therefore asked, as she and the Buttoner proceeded rapidly towards Jacob's Island.

"Don't ask me a single question now," he repiled, in a hurried and even tremulous voice: for vile and criminal as he was, he could not contemplate with utter indifference the murder of that fine young woman who was now leaning on his arm.

They continued their way in silence; and in a few minutes reached the dark crib. Bencull opened the street-door; and the moment Nell Gibson entered the back room, she perceived by the looks of the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker that something was ominously amiss. Turning towards the Buttoner for an explanation, she saw that the expression of his countenance was dogged and sombre as if marked with the iron impress of some stern resolve: and then as her glance, now keen with augmenting terror, travelled to the features of Bencull as he came in last and closed the room-door behind him, she read her doom as it were in the looks of that dreadful man.

But not choosing to anticipate any evil—and indeed utterly unable to conjecture whence it could spring so as to assume an aspect at all menacing towards herself she said in that tone of inquiry which an accomplice adopts when demanding an explanation as a right, "Now will you tell me what has been the result of this night's enterprise?"

"'Tis for you to tell us what Larry Sampson gave you for betraying the plot!" exclaimed the Hangman in a voice of thunder, as he turned his ferocious looks full upon the now really dismayed and startled young woman.

"Yes—how much did you get?" demanded Bencull, with equal ferocity of voice and look.

"Whatever may have happened, I did not betray you—I swear that I did not!" said Nell Gibson, now recovering somewhat of her presence of mind, while indignation deepened the colour upon her cheeks to the ruddiest glow.

"I knew she would deny it," said the Hangman, his eyes literally glowing upon her. "Why, you she-devil! Larry Sampson has not only baulked us and had the laugh at us, but he also knew that me, Bencull, and the Buttoner was the chaps that did the business t'other night at the Baronet's——"

"Yes—and he knowed all about Coffin's intending to go and get the great book," added Bencull, with such a concentrated ferocity that his voice sounded like the subdued roar of a wild beast.

"I am innocent of all this!" said Nell Gibson, her presence of mind rapidly failing.

"You lie!" thundered the Hangman. "We are certain that you have betrayed us: who else could have done it? Besides, we know more of your nasty sneaking tricks than you fancy——"

"Yes, look here," suddenly cried the Buttoner, producing Nell Gibson's own letter to Sir Douglas Huntingdon—that letter which she had penned at Meg Blowen's, and which her paramour had subsequently obtained from the boy to whom she had entrusted it for delivery.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, becoming pale as death—for she saw that her doom was inevitable: and now, though she tried to speak, the words stuck in her throat, and terror subdued all further power of utterance.

"You see she's guilty—there's no doubt of it!" said the Hangman: and suddenly flinging off his coat, he actually tucked up his shirt-sleeves in order more effectually to do the work of death.

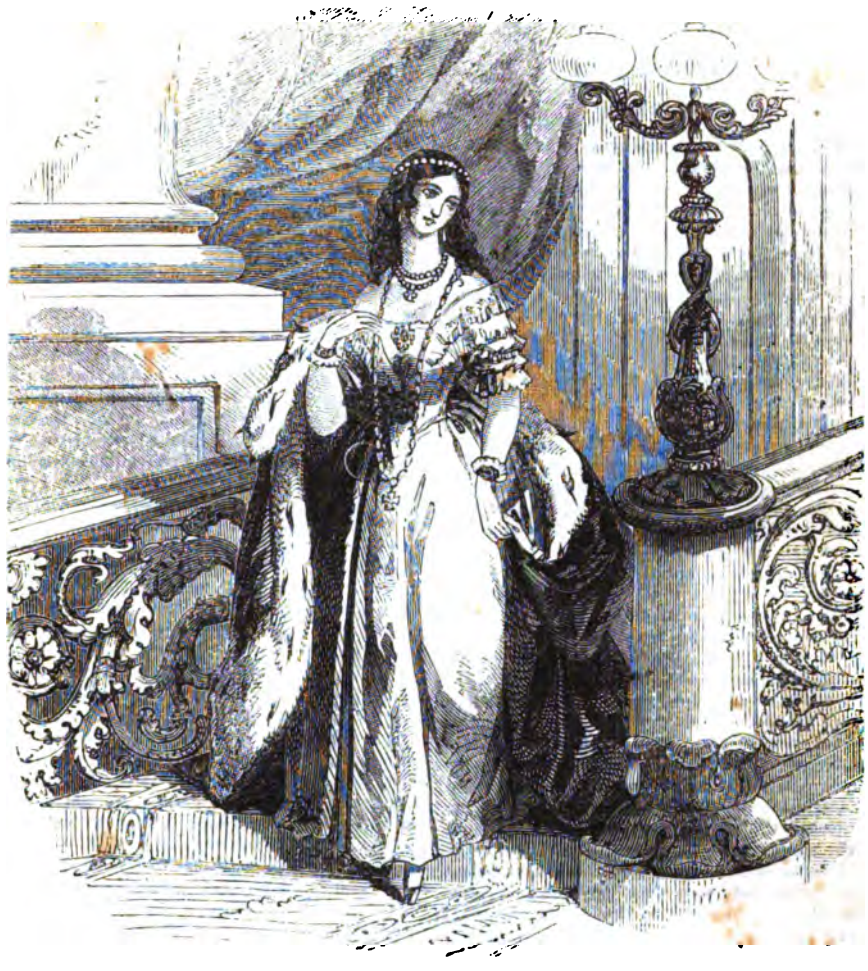
At the same instant Bencull threw a silk handkerchief round Nell Gibson's neck; and placing his hand forcibly over her mouth, he prevented her from screaming. The other ruffians, not even excepting the Buttoner, now flew upon her like so many wild beasts upon their prey; and while some held her hands and feet, the others tugged hard at the handkerchief in order to strangle her. She struggled desperately, though in the iron grasp of those strong men: her cloak and bonnet were torn off—and her hair streamed down in wild disorder. Hard, hard did she fight against death: fearful was the convulsive tenacity with which the unfortunate girl clung to life! But gradually those strong spasmodic struggles grew weaker and weaker; and in a few more instants all was over!

The villains might have despatched her more speedily by the pistol, the knife, or the bludgeon: but they were afraid of exciting the attention of the neighbours by the report of fire-arms—and they were equally careful of spilling blood, which would leave its traces upon the floor—inasmuch as the attention of Mr. Lawrence Sampson had now evidently become fixed upon the dark crib.

But the work of murder was effectually done by means of strangulation: and when the appalling deed was accomplished the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cried like a child.

"What the devil is the meaning of this blubbering?" demanded the Hangman, with a terrible imprecation.

"It's nothink—on'y a sort of nervous fit that I can't help for the moment," whimpered the Buttoner. "There—take her away—take her away—don't let her stare up at me with those eyes that are fixed and dull as if made of glass!—Take her away, I say!"—and the strong man shuddered from head to foot with hysterical convulsions.



"You two look to him," growled the Hangman, addressing the command to the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durrynacker. "Come along, Bencull—you and me must do the rest of the work betwixt us."

"To be sure," responded Bencull, raising the corpse by the legs while Daniel Coffin lifted it by the shoulders. "Now then—come quick—out of this here door—there—that's right!"

And the two men emerged into the little gallery behind the house, bearing the dead body between them in the manner just described.

"Now let's lower it down gently, Ben," said the Hangman, "so as not to make a splash. There's nobody about to see what's going on!"

Nobody to see! Ah—the insensate wretch!—the eye of God was upon him—fixed on that scene of murder: and yet, because there was no candle at any neighbouring window, and because not a human soul was visible either on the opposite side of the ditch or on the bridges, the ruthless murderers fancied that no eye was upon them as they lowered the corpse into the stagnant dyke!

The light of the silver crescent moon shone upon this last act in the terrible drama:, and as Bencull and the Hangman thus let down their victim into the slimy grave, there was a moment, as she hung over the wooden parapet ere they let go the handkerchief that they held in their grasp,—a moment, we say, at which the pure lustre of the planet of the night fell powerfully upon the countenance of the unfortunate young woman, showing in their distorted ghastliness those features that were so recently full of animation and even beauty! For a moment also did that moonlight delineate the form that was so finely modelled, but which now hung in the dread abandonment of death!

Terrible indeed was every detail of the tremendous

tragedy of this awful night: but in another moment all was over. The corpse was lowered down into its black sepulchre of slime—and the dark muddy waters closed with but a sluggish ripple above it.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE TOKENS.

We must once more transport our readers to Paris—that peerless city which not only sets the fashions for the fair sex, but also affords the example of revolutionary glory to all the nations that are down-trampled and enslaved.

Three weeks had elapsed since that memorable night on which Julia Owen, under the name of *Laura Linden*, had brought all the artillery of her wiles and intrigues, her witcheries and her blandishments, to bear upon Jocelyn Loftus in the prison department of the Prefecture of Police.

The reader will recollect that it was an accident which revealed to Jocelyn the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though lovely Julia Owen; and that this sudden discovery was followed by earnest remonstrances on the part of the young gentleman and impassioned entreaties on that of the young lady. Indeed, in the enthusiasm to which she worked herself up and with which her maddening desires helped to animate her, Julia had threatened to commit suicide unless Jocelyn would consent to crown her hopes and minister to her sensual cravings. Then was it that in a tone of mingled remonstrance and despair, he exclaimed, "Oh! you will drive me mad—you will drive me mad!"—to which the infatuated Julia responded with all the fervour of devouring passion, "O Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn—thou knowest that I love thee!" That same instant Louisa Stanley was alike a listener and a spectatress; and the scream which thrilled from her lips penetrated through Jocelyn's brain. By the aid of the lamp he looked through the aperture in the partition-wall; and on recognising his Louisa, a cry of rage and madness burst from him. All in a moment did he understand what must have been the impression produced upon the mind of his well-beloved; and while levelling the bitterest reproaches against Julia Owen, he fell down insensible.

All these particulars have we thus rapidly recapitulated in order to refresh the memory of the reader. We may now add that when Jocelyn returned to consciousness, he found a physician and a nurse seated by his bedside; and on inquiry he learnt that *for ten days* he had been ill with a delirious fever.

Ten days! and how much might have happened in that time! His Louisa had doubtless renounced him for ever; and thus were his fondest, dearest, brightest hopes destroyed beyond redemption! No—not beyond redemption: for he could explain to Louisa all that had occurred—he could show her how he had been made a victim instead of wilfully becoming a criminal. Yes: but by what means was he to communicate with her?—for he was still a prisoner—still subjected to all the rigours of that seclusion to which he had been consigned from the first moment of his arrest.

He appealed to the physician for leave to send to the post a letter which he wished to write: but the medical man, too independent if not too honest to deceive him with false representations, at once declared that he had no authority in the matter. Jocelyn then sent to demand an interview with the Prefect; and this functionary at once acceded to the young gentleman's request and repaired to his chamber. The physician and nurse withdrew; and when Loftus was alone with the Prefect, he demanded an explanation of what had occurred—how Julia Owen had been his neighbour, and how Miss Louisa Stanley had been brought to the Prefecture? To these queries the Prefect however declined giving an answer; and Jocelyn therefore remained in torturing suspense as to the circumstances which had arisen or the influences that had been exercised in order to place Louisa in a position to form the most erroneous and the most fatal opinion of his fidelity and honour. Finding that the Prefect would not give him any explanations on those heads, Jocelyn asked whether he might be permitted to communicate with his friends. The reply was exactly that which he had anticipated—namely, a negative, decisive enough though couched in the most courteous terms. He next demanded how long he was to be retained a prisoner; and thereupon the Prefect addressed him in the following manner:—

"In expectation of your convalescence, and naturally supposing that you would wish to put a term to your imprisonment, those who at present rule your destinies have prepared this bond, which you must sign; and I am instructed—upon receiving your signature, after you shall have duly perused and considered it—to grant you your freedom."

"My freedom!" ejaculated Loftus. "And immediately too?" he asked, raising himself up in his couch and looking eagerly at the Prefect.

"Yes—this very day if you choose," replied the functionary. "It is now two o'clock in the afternoon," he added consulting his watch; "and there is not the slightest reason wherefore you should not be comfortably installed at one of our gay Parisian hotels ere sunset."

"Oh! but I am so weak—so feeble—so ill," murmured Loftus, sinking back upon the pillow.

"Change of air and a sense of freedom will speedily restore you to health," said the Prefect.

"Give me the bond," cried Loftus, stretching out his hand: "let me see what it contains! And yet," he observed, abruptly checking the eagerness of his manner, while a dark cloud fell as suddenly upon his features; "it is useless—I know beforehand it is useless! That bond doubtless stipulates conditions which I cannot in honour fulfil——"

"Then will you remain a captive all your life?" asked the Prefect, significantly.

"Heavens! can such an atrocity be contemplated towards me?" exclaimed Jocelyn, in mingled astonishment and terror.

"You must understand," said the Prefect, "that inasmuch as the individuals whom your conduct has converted into enemies, are possessed of power illimitable, so will their persecution of you be pitiless if you persist in thwarting or interfering with their designs. Believe me, young man, it is a somewhat dangerous thing to obey the impulses of a maudlin chivalry, a sickly sentimentalism, or a false honour——"

"Silence, sir!" exclaimed Loftus, with a mingled dignity and sternness, as the excitement of his soul animated him with the strength to raise himself up once more to a sitting posture in the couch: "you are calumniating all the finest feelings that belong to our nature. Because I have vowed to frustrate the schemes which are in progress to accomplish the ruin of a persecuted and injured Princess—for that *this* is the cause of my imprisonment I can of course full well conceive——"

"Let us not bandy words," interrupted the Prefect. "The means of liberty are within your reach; and at all events there will be no harm in your perusing the bond," he added, drawing a parchment from his pocket.

Loftus took the deed—opened it—and endeavoured to read its contents. But only a few hours had elapsed since he had awakened to consciousness from the protracted delirium of fever; and a mist was still upon his eyes—so that he could not concentrate the powers of vision upon minute points. Dropping the document from his hand and sinking back upon the pillow, he said in a bitter tone, "I cannot read it: and even if I could, I am persuaded it would be useless."

"Nevertheless, permit me," exclaimed the Prefect, "to describe the leading points in the bond:"—then perceiving that Jocelyn offered no objection, he continued to say, "The first stipulation is to the effect that you solemnly and sacredly pledge yourself to bury in oblivion all the information you may ever have received relative to the mission of the Misses Owen and their appointment to situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Secondly, you renounce all idea of forming so unequal a match as that which you have contemplated in respect to Miss Louisa Stanley. Thirdly, you resume before the world your proper name, and make due submission to——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Jocelyn Loftus, the flush of indignation appearing upon his countenance, a moment before so pale. "Were your infamous Bastile still in existence, I would sooner be consigned to eternal immurement in one of its living tombs, than assent to the terms contained in that document. And now I can full well understand from what quarter emanate these persecutions. But, O God!" he exclaimed, an expression of sudden agony passing over his countenance as a thought struck him; "grant that poor Louisa fall not into the meshes and toils——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a suffocating sob which burst from Jocelyn's lips; and for two or three minutes he was almost completely unmanned by the violence of his emotions. Weakened and enfeebled as he was by illness, it cannot be wondered if his mind were sympathetically attenuated, and that his feelings should for a space triumph over his habitual fortitude.

"No—it is not a Bastile which you have to dread," observed the Prefect after a pause; "but if you still continue obstinate——"

"You mean," interrupted Loftus, bitterly, "if I still continue to spurn proposals alike dishonourable and tyrannical to a degree——"

"Well, we will not dispute as to words," resumed the Prefect, rising from the seat which he had taken by the young gentleman's bedside: "but perhaps you will understand me when I state that if we have no Bastiles, yet we have madhouses;—and should you persevere in your present course——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Loftus, all his wonted fortitude now returning to his aid. "You may consign me to a lunatic asylum on pretences as base as those which have made me a prisoner at the Prefecture: but all the diabolical tyranny of the mad-doctor, and all the coercion of the strait-waistcoat, the barred chamber, the iron chains, and the ferocious keeper, will not prove more effective with me than the persuasion of his Excellency the Prefect of Police!"

And as Jocelyn Loftus gave utterance to these words, he surveyed the French functionary with a calm but noble dignity which was more impressive than an angry defiance would have been.

"Then you refuse your signature to this bond?" said the Prefect, moving towards the door.

"I do," was the firm reply. "And now, before you leave me, sir, let me remark that the day will come when you may perhaps repent of your conduct towards one who never injured you. Indeed, if there be a spark of generous feeling in your nature—if you have aught of that chivalry in your soul for which your nation is so justly famed—you must shrink from the unworthy position which you are occupying—namely, that of the despots' tool! No honourable man would consent to be the gaoler of an innocent person under such circumstances."

The Prefect of Police made no reply to this language of rebuke and remonstrance uttered with dignity rather than with passion: but waiting until Jocelyn had ceased, his Excellency merely bowed and then quitted the room, to which the physician and the nurse soon afterwards returned.

A week now passed away, thus making up the three weeks which at the commencement of this chapter we stated to have elapsed since the memorable night of Julia Owen's adventures. During those seven days which thus succeeded the interview with the Prefect, Jocelyn Loftus became pretty well restored to health. But his mind remained a prey to cruel misgivings and incessant anxieties.

That the Marquis of Leveson had interfered in his affairs, he had not the slightest doubt. In the first place, it was the Marquis who had been instrumental in nominating the Owens to their present mission; in the second place, he was interested for his own reputation's sake in preventing any exposure of the conspiracy thus in progress against the Princess of Wales; and thirdly, it was perfectly intelligible to Jocelyn wherefore the Marquis sought to prevent his union with an obscure and portionless girl such as Louisa Stanley. Arguing, therefore, from all these circumstances that Lord Leveson had been busily engaged against him, Jocelyn was fearful that the Marquis might by some means or other have gained the confidence of Louisa; and although the young lover had too sublime a faith in the purity and chastity of the damsel's soul to imagine for an instant that she would lend an ear to any overtures which the veteran debauchee might choose to make, yet knowing full well how unprincipled and unscrupulous was the character of that nobleman, Jocelyn could not help fearing for Louisa as

one may tremble for the lamb in the power of the wolf!

Thus did the week following the interview with the Prefect pass unhappily enough for Jocelyn Loftus: but still he was determined to endure any amount of persecution and undergo any extent of adversity, rather than submit to the terms dictated by his enemies.

At the end of the week the physician pronounced his patient to be so far recovered as not to require his services any longer. Jocelyn saw that it was of no use to endeavour to interest the medical man in his behalf: for though full of that courtesy which seems innate with every Frenchman, he was nevertheless evidently a mere tool of the Prefect. Loftus therefore contented himself with thanking the physician for his attentions; and the medical man then took his leave.

But the nurse still remained. She was a Frenchwoman of about sixty—taciturn, and reserved, but keen and shrewd, and with that kind of sharp angular countenance which denotes extreme artfulness and duplicity. Hitherto she had never addressed a word to Loftus save in fulfilment of her ministering duties as a nurse; but the moment the physician had taken his departure she suddenly assumed a look of deep significancy, as if encouraging Jocelyn to question her.

"And are your services likewise to cease?" he asked, addressing her of course in the French tongue.

"That depends upon you, sir," she immediately answered: "and if you are wise you will send a note to the Prefect desiring that I may be allowed to remain in attendance upon you a few days more. Should he hesitate, you must pretend to suffer a relapse, so that it may become a matter of apparent necessity for me to stay. His Excellency has the utmost faith in me: I have been attached to the establishment for the last twenty years; and he does not think me capable of abusing his confidence."

Jocelyn had listened in mingled amazement and hope to this speech, which the old nurse delivered in a cautious whisper: but after the conduct of the charwoman in becoming the agent of Julia Owen's manœuvres, and considering also those manœuvres themselves, Loftus was resolved not to be hasty in putting faith in anybody belonging to the Prefecture.

"What am I to understand from all that you have just told me?" he inquired, looking her full in the face.

"That I am anxious and able to serve you," she immediately answered, "if you choose to be served by me."

"But to what end?" asked Jocelyn, "and in what manner?"

"I suppose an escape is the end aimed at," she returned: "but as to the plan to be adopted, I know naught of it."

"Tell me what you meant by the way in which you addressed me just now," said Jocelyn, resolved to hear more ere he committed himself in any manner. "For during the past week—indeed, since the delirium left me—you have been for hours and hours alone with me in this room, during the intervals between the doctor's visits; and not once have you spoken a single cheering word, nor thrown aside your chill reserve—far less have you given any indication of anxiety or willingness to obtain my confidence."

"Because," rejoined the nurse, "nothing transpired in your favour outside these walls until to-day."

"And what has happened at length, then?" asked Jocelyn, every nerve and fibre thrilling with uncertainty and suspense.

"When I went out an hour ago, to procure some jelly for you at the pastry-cook's," said the old nurse, "I was accosted by a gentleman who asked me if I belonged to the Prefecture, as he saw me issue forth from the building with a small market-basket hanging to my arm. I answered in the affirmative; and pulling a handful of gold out of his pocket as a sign that he was able and willing to recompense, he besought me to give him a few minutes' private conversation. I told him to follow me to the pastry-cook's; and on arriving there, we went into an inner room, where we sate down to discourse. The gentleman—who, by the by, I should have said is an Englishman, although he speaks French as well as you do, sir—put twenty pieces of gold into my hand and asked me if I would accept the sum as an earnest of what he was disposed to give if I could and would serve him. To convince you, sir, that I am telling the truth," added the nurse, "here are the twenty pieces that he gave me—all in *guineas*, as I think you call them in your language:"—and she displayed the coin as she spoke.

"Well, I certainly see that you have twenty good golden guineas," said Jocelyn, his heart beating high with hope notwithstanding his endeavour to put a bridle upon his credulity. "Pray proceed."

"The English gentleman, after a great many questions," continued the nurse, "evidently for the purpose of testing my good faith, came to the point at length by asking me whether I knew any prisoner of your name——"

"What name?" asked our hero.

"*Jocelyn Loftus*," returned the old nurse: "for although I know, sir, that it is not your right name, yet I am not aware what your right one really is. The Englishman however of whom I am speaking, mentioned you by the name which you bear here; and in reply to his question I told him not only that I knew you, but that I was actually appointed by the Prefect to wait upon you. At these tidings he was perfectly overjoyed; but with a reasonable regard for caution, he would say nothing more unless I took him back from you some token to prove that you believed me to be trustworthy. And that you may be enabled to do this if you choose, I have brought a token from the Englishman."

"Give it to me," exclaimed Loftus, now utterly unable to subdue or conceal his eagerness; and clutching at a scrap of paper which the old woman handed him, he hastily read the following lines:—

"Clara Stanley has seen her sister Louisa, who is safe. This is a token that you have friends outside. Send a token to prove that the bearer may be trusted."

A fervid joy now flamed up in Jocelyn's eyes and glowed upon his countenance: for a thousand thrilling and ecstatic ideas swept through his brain. Louisa was safe—and Clara had seen her since the adventure in Paris. But were the sisters now interesting themselves by means of some trusty agent

to effect his liberation? and if so, was it not a proof that his well-beloved still cherished his image—was still devoted to him? And if she still clung to his memory and still considered herself his betrothed, was it not an evidence that she no longer believed him unfaithful? and did it not appear as if the wheel of fortune had begun to turn in his favour?

Such was the first gush of delicious thoughts that were excited by that scrap of paper: but now came the more serious reflection—was he to put faith in this seeming token? or was it the first step in some new intrigue to destroy him?

"Describe to me the person of this Englishman whom you have met," he said, once more resuming a tone of caution and a look of reserve.

"Rather stout—of middle height—and about forty," returned the nurse: "great black whiskers and mustachios—red face and fierce-looking—dressed in a military style—and carries a great stick with a large knob."

"I have not the slightest idea who he is," observed Loftus, thinking that the description was much more suitable to a Frenchman than to an Englishman: and again he hesitated as to the amount of reliance he ought to place upon the old woman's tale.

But still he saw not how the token sent to him could possibly form a link in any chain of contemplated treachery; and much less could he understand how he should be compromising himself by sending some sign in reply. Besides, where nothing was risked, nothing would be gained: and if he indeed had friends outside, it was his duty to acknowledge their good intentions and do all he could to further them. Therefore, without any more hesitation, he at once wrote on the back of the slip of paper the following words:—

"Has Miss Louisa returned to Canterbury? or is she with her sister in Stratton-street, London?"

"When are you to meet the Englishman again?" he asked, as he handed the scrap of paper back to the old nurse.

"This evening at seven o'clock," was the response. "But in the meantime, do you write to the Prefect and solicit that I shall remain in attendance upon you."

Loftus hastened to comply with this suggestion; and in the course of an hour he received a written answer from the Prefect, couched in the following terms:—

"*Cabinet of the Prefecture of Police.*

"November 24th, 1814.

"Sir,—I beg to inform you that I have received your note, and in reply thereto have to state that the attentions of the nurse shall be continued towards you so long as you remain a prisoner in the Prefecture. But the medical attendant has this day reported your complete recovery; and I have therefore to inform you that according to the instructions which I have received, you must prepare for removal to another place in the course of two or three days, unless you assent to those terms which may at once empower me to restore you to liberty.

"I have the honour to salute you,

"THE PREFECT OF POLICE."

Jocelyn read this note to the old nurse, watching her countenance as he did so: but he could not discover in her looks anything to make him suspect that she was playing him false or was privy to any new plot initiated against him. He now therefore anxiously awaited the result of her next interview with the Englishman; and as seven o'clock approached, his excitement rose to the highest degree. At length she took her departure; and after an absence of more than an hour she made her appearance again in the prison-chamber.

"I have seen the Englishman," she said; "and I gave him back the scrap of paper on which you had written something, which evidently satisfied him that I was trustworthy. He thereupon took me in a hackney-coach to a house in the Rue du Bac; and in a handsome apartment on the first floor I was introduced to an elderly gentleman with a great brown wig, red whiskers, and a very good set of teeth. He is also an Englishmen. A few words passed between him and the gentleman who had brought me hither: but as they spoke in English I did not understand what they said. I however perceived that the one with the black whiskers and mustachios was called *Captain*."

"I cannot think who they can be," said Jocelyn. "But pray go on."

"The gentleman with the brown wig and red whiskers desired me to sit down: and he then proceeded to put all kinds of questions concerning the Prefecture—its internal arrangements, the distribution of the buildings, the manner in which they are guarded, and the exact position of your chamber. To all these queries," continued the nurse, "I gave the fullest and most faithful particulars. Indeed, being well aware for what motive I was thus interrogated, I told the two gentlemen that it would be madness to dream of effecting your escape either by force or stratagem, so long as the Prefecture remained your prison. Struck by this last observation of mine, they asked what I meant; and I proceeded to explain that this very afternoon you had received a letter from the Prefect intimating that you were shortly to be removed elsewhere. This statement seemed to give a new impulse to the thoughts of your English friends; and after conversing together for a short time in their own language, the Captain penned a few hasty lines which he bade me give you."

With these words the old woman handed Loftus a note, the contents of which he eagerly perused, and which ran as follow:—

"The few words you sent just now have been regarded as a token that the bearer is fully trustworthy. Being unacquainted with your handwriting, it was necessary to receive from you some proof that the little billet was really delivered to *you yourself*, instead of being placed in the hands of your gaolers. The words you wrote back, could not well have been forged by any official of the Prefecture, inasmuch as they involve questions which none but you would have been likely to put; and therefore we received them as a token that the first little missive really reached you. It now appears that you are soon to be removed. You must ascertain, if possible, when this removal will take place, and whither you are going. But if you cannot glean these particulars, you need not despair: we shall maintain a constant watch—as we are pledged to accomplish our aim!

"Miss Louisa Stanley has returned to her residence at Canterbury, having escaped from many perils. We are enabled to assure you that nothing which your enemies have devised or done, has in any way impaired her full confidence in you.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

The joy—the supreme, ineffable joy—which Loftus experienced on perusing the latter part of

the letter, so transcended all the previous satisfaction which he felt at the prospects of escape held out by the preceding portion, that he for a few minutes forgot everything save the one grand fact that his Louisa loved him as fondly as ever. The assurance thus conveyed seemed to inspire him with new life: hope lit up its flaming beacon before his eyes—and again did he whisper to himself that the wheel of fortune was turning in his favour.

But when the first gush of ecstatic feelings had thus found a vent, he was enabled to revert with befitting seriousness and deliberation to the measures that were in progress for his escape. To solicit another interview with the Prefect was the only way to obtain the information which his friends outside requested him to procure—namely, the time fixed for his removal, and the place to which he was to be removed: but as it was now nine o'clock in the evening he considered it best to postpone the demand for that interview with the Prefect until the following morning. Dismissing the nurse therefore for the night, he remained alone to meditate upon his prospects, his hopes, and his love.

After breakfast next morning he was about to pen a note to the Prefect, when the door opened and that functionary entered the room. The old nurse immediately withdrew; and the moment she had retired, the Prefect addressed himself to Jocelyn in the following manner:—

"By this morning's post I have received a letter from London. It is to the effect that from something which has transpired within the last week or ten days, it is deemed expedient no longer to insist upon that clause in the bond which forbids your alliance with Miss Louisa Stanley."

"Ah!" ejaculated Loftus, in astonishment; "what could have transpired to have produced this change of opinion upon that point? Your Excellency can surely speak with more openness and less enigma than heretofore. Indeed, I know full well that the Marquis of Leveson is at the bottom of all this——"

"Well, then," observed the Prefect, hastily, "it does appear from the letter I have received this morning, that his lordship *has* learnt something which has induced him to alter his mind very materially concerning this matrimonial project of your's. But whether it be that Miss Louisa Stanley turns out to be more highly connected than he had at first supposed—or whether she has suddenly proved the heiress to a fortune—I am of course utterly unable to conjecture. Suffice it for you to know, that this particular clause in the bond is withdrawn; and I will take it upon myself to erase the stipulation which requires your submission and obedience to the Marquis of Leveson. It now therefore only remains for you to sign your assent to that clause which sacredly and solemnly pledges you to abstain from any interference in the affairs of the Princess of Wales—to bury in oblivion all that you may have ever learnt upon that subject—and to pursue your future career as if no such details had ever come to your knowledge."

"I have listened to your Excellency with varied feelings of interest," said Jocelyn, in a firm and deliberate tone. "That an assent should now be given to my union with Miss Louisa Stanley, is so far agreeable inasmuch as it can only be a tribute of admiration and respect accorded to her beauty and her virtues: for that she has suddenly discovered any high connexions or become possessed of a fortune, I do not for a moment believe. The clause relative to my submission to the Marquis of Leveson could indeed be well dispensed with, for reasons which I need not explain. But as for that clause which *is* to remain and which I am to be called upon to sign—were I to purchase my freedom on such terms, never should I dare venture into the presence of Louisa Stanley again. When first I set out upon this enterprise, she encouraged me to pursue it; and with all the generosity of her nature did she appreciate the duty which circumstances thus imposed upon me. She felt for the injured Princess—not because she *is* a Princess—but because she is a woman—a wronged and injured woman!—and she would regard me as a coward—a base recreant—were I now, in a moment of weakness or folly, to abandon the cause of that persecuted lady."

The Prefect exerted all his eloquence to remonstrate, persuade, and cajole, in order to induce Jocelyn to sign the bond, now cut down to a single clause: but not even to this one clause would the young man append his name. At length, tired of his unavailing endeavours to alter the prisoner's decision, the Prefect said, "Then if you are bent upon this obstinacy, I have no alternative but to follow out the instructions which I have received."

"And those instructions?" said Loftus, interrogatively.

"To treat you as a lunatic," responded the Prefect, "and remove you to an asylum for the insane. To-morrow night, therefore, at eleven o'clock, will you be transferred hence—unless in the interval you yield to the dictates of reason and prudence."

Having thus spoken, his Excellency hastened from the room; and soon afterwards the old nurse returned. Jocelyn now penned the following note:—

"To my friends outside,—Whoever ye are, accept my sincerest and most heartfelt thanks! Your note duly reached me; and as a further token that it is really I, the undersigned, who am thus corresponding with you, permit me to ask whether Miss Clara Stanley is still residing with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford in Stratton Street, Piccadilly? The time of my removal is fixed for to-morrow night at eleven; and my destiny is *a mad-house*—but where situated I know not. This point I could not ascertain; nor is there any chance of discovering it. I have not the slightest doubt that the old woman is fully trustworthy.

"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

But scarcely had our hero penned the last words of his note, when the thought suddenly struck him, with the dismaying effect of a lightning-flash, that although the nurse brought the notes to him and carried his own to the friends outside, yet that it was quite possible for her to submit the whole correspondence to the Prefect as it passed through her hands. This idea had not struck him before; and his heart now sank within him. He glanced up from the paper on which he had just been writing, and encountered the looks of the woman as they were fixed upon him: but there was nothing troubled in the manner in which she met his gaze. On the contrary, she evidently perceived that some misgiving had suddenly entered his mind; and in a calm unruffled tone, she said, "I cannot convince you, sir, of my fidelity: but after all, what risk do you run by trusting me? If I really am faithful, well and good: but if, on the other hand, I am all the while betraying you to the Prefect, what alteration can it

make in the circumstances of your position? You are not like a murderer or a felon, on whom heavy irons are put when he attempts to escape."

The truth of these observations forcibly struck Jocelyn Loftus; and even if he were not thoroughly convinced of the old woman's fidelity, he at all events resolved to allow the matter to take its course. But to the note which he had just penned, he added the words—"*Nevertheless, use the utmost caution.*"

The old nurse presently sallied forth with this letter; and in about an hour she returned, bearing a written reply which ran as follows:—

"Your note is received; and in pursuance of your recommendation *to use caution*, we shall not commit any of our plans to paper. Suffice it to say that we are neither inactive nor irresolute. Miss Clara Stanley was residing in Stratton Street when we left London a few days ago.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

"P.S.—Unless anything of importance should transpire—such, for instance, as the postponement of your removal—it will not be necessary for any farther communication to take place between us. We have given the old woman a hundred guineas."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform our readers that the remainder of this day and the whole of the next passed amidst much anxiety and torturing suspense. At one moment Jocelyn was buoyed up with exulting hope, feeling confident in the success of the plans, whatever they were, which his friends outside were conducting: at another moment his spirits drooped, as a bird plunges down from the loftiest clouds into the lowest abysses of some yawning gulf—and he fancied that he was betrayed! As the hour approached for his removal from the Prefecture, the restlessness of his spirit amounted to a positive excruciation; and he felt the blood coursing at a fever-pace in its crimson channels.

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE JOURNEY

At ten o'clock on the night fixed for Jocelyn's departure, the Prefect visited him, and made a last effort to induce him to sign the bond.

"You see," observed his Excellency, "what a high opinion even your very enemies have of your honour and integrity, since they are willing to permit you to go at large in the world, the possessor of all their most important secrets, with no other guarantee than your simple written pledge that you will not reveal them."

"Yes," said Jocelyn, bitterly;—"they first attempted to destroy every sentiment of virtue and paralyse every impulse of honour within my breast—for that this was the aim in subjecting me to the seductive wiles of the temptress Julia Owen, I cannot doubt. But having had so signal a proof that I prefer the approval of my conscience to all the blandishments of transient pleasure, and that I cherish honour as if it were a worship,—my enemies, as you justly style them, are now willing to trust themselves to that integrity and that sense of rectitude which they have vainly endeavoured to subvert. They know that my pledge would be my bond, and that my written promise would never be falsified. But that pledge and that promise they will not obtain from me!"

These words were uttered in so firm a tone that the Prefect of Police offered no farther remonstrance and attempted no more persuasion; but coldly bowing to our young hero, he quitted the room. A few minutes afterwards the old nurse entered to take leave of Jocelyn; and she spoke her farewells with an air of so much sincerity that all remaining suspicions with regard to her were banished from his mind.

A little before eleven Jocelyn was fetched from his room by a couple of gendarmes and conducted down to the court-yard, where a post-chaise and four appeared in readiness. The postilions were ready mounted—the lamps of the vehicle were lighted—and the moment Loftus entered, the door was banged and the equipage rolled at a rapid rate through the gloomy gate of the Prefecture.

Inside the chaise Jocelyn found himself in the companionship of two individuals. One of them he speedily recognised, by the light which the street-lamps shed into the carriage, as the very same police-agent who had arrested him nearly two months back at the Hotel Meurice: the other was unknown to Jocelyn, but was no doubt likewise an official of the Prefecture. Both were in plain clothes; and the first-mentioned one immediately addressed our hero in terms of politeness, to which a somewhat cold though sufficiently courteous response was given: but it was not to be supposed that Jocelyn could feel very well inclined to converse familiarly with any of the agents of that tyranny to which he was being subjected.

On emerging from the Prefecture, the post-chaise rattled along the quays bordering the Seine; and turning into the central avenue of the Champs Elysées, took the road for St. Germain. While in the Champs Elysées, and indeed within the immediate precincts of the suburbs, there were so many vehicles hurrying in every direction that it was impossible to say whether any particular one was following the post-chaise: but when proceeding farther along the road and the open country was gained, Jocelyn listened anxiously for the sounds of any vehicle in pursuit. For if his English friends were not thus following, how was it possible that they could accomplish his rescue? Such was the question which he asked himself a dozen times during the first half-hour that elapsed after leaving the Parisian suburbs behind: but no sounds of any vehicle in pursuit reached his ears.

The weather was fine, clear and frosty: the moon sat enthroned in silver splendour amidst the deep blue of the cloudless over-arching sky, which was gemmed with myriads of stars, those chaste handmaids of the Queen of Night! The police-agents, finding that Jocelyn did not encourage them in conversation, soon sank into silence: but through the semi-obscurity which prevailed inside the vehicle, our hero could observe their eyes fixed upon him with the keenness of custodians whom no soothing influence could lull into slumber so long as a watch must be kept.

The journey had now lasted upwards of an hour, when suddenly a man on horseback, coming from behind—that is to say, from the direction of Paris—shot past the post-chaise with incredible speed.

"His horse has run away with him," observed one of the police-agents: and as he put down the window and looked forth, the movement of his body made his coat open somewhat, and Jocelyn observed

that he had a pair of pistols secured about his person.

In about a couple of minutes after the horseman had galloped by with the meteor-like rapidity just described, another one, equally well mounted and proceeding at the same desperate rate, swept past the chaise—no sooner appearing than he was instantaneously out of sight.

"Hah! I should think they must be government expresses," observed the police-agent who was looking out at the window: "and yet they did not appear to have on the official uniform."

"It was impossible to tell at the rate they swept past," said the other police-agent. "They must be Government couriers—or else the American Ambassador's expresses bound for Havre."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when a vehicle, built like the tall English phaeton then in vogue—drawn by two splendid horses—and containing three persons, also swept by the chaise in the same direction as the two horsemen, who from their fleetness might be taken for the outriders of that dashing equipage.

"Ah! at what a tremendous rate that vehicle is going," cried the police-agent who still had his head at the window. "I wonder what it can mean? Doubtless some of your mad-cap fellow-countrymen, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Loftus: "for you Englishmen are desperate riders and drivers, and can make your horses do anything."

"Those travellers, whoever they may be, are indeed going very quick," said our hero, assuming a tone of the most perfect indifference, although a powerful excitement was really agitating in his breast—for a secret voice seemed to whisper that those dashing horsemen and the occupants of the phaeton were the friends whose presence he had been so eagerly expecting upon the road.

Scarcely had he come to this conviction when the chaise entered the town of St. Germain; and there the horses were changed. The halt only occupied two or three minutes; and the vehicle proceeded on at a rapid rate. Half-an hour elapsed—St. Germain was far behind—and the road now lay through a wood stretching far as the eye could reach on either side till lost in the gloom of distance. The moon still shone in unclouded splendour, shadowing forth the sombre appearance of the landscape; for not a human habitation was now to be seen. A presentiment sprang up in Jocelyn's mind that ere the wood was cleared something would be attempted by his friends; and as he leant back in the seat, the two officers sitting opposite to him, he endeavoured through the obscurity to discover with straining looks, the exact position in which the principal police-agent's pistols were secured at his waist—for our young hero was resolved, if any attack were made, to second as resolutely as he could *inside* the endeavours of his friends *outside*.

Rapidly along the level road—which ran straight as an arrow through the wood—proceeded the equipage. By the shadow which it threw upon the ground, in the powerful moonlight, Jocelyn could perceive that there were no guards or gendarmes seated outside the chaise: the two agents who occupied the interior along with him, were therefore the only persons to contend against—for the postilions were sure not to be armed. Perceiving, therefore, that he was so slightly guarded, he felt assured that the old nurse had not betrayed to the Prefect the proceedings of his friends, and that therefore such an eventuality as an attempt at rescue had never been dreamt of by the authorities.

Scarcely had Jocelyn revolved all these calculations in his own mind, when from the two branches of a cross-road a sudden attack was made upon the equipage. From the right hand and the left, simultaneously and with matchless energy, was the onslaught made by five determined persons. The postilions were instantaneously knocked from their horses: a foot was then placed on either breast and a pistol pointed at either head, accompanied with stern injunctions to remain quiet, "or their brains would be blown out." One of the postilions was completely stunned by the fall, and with regard to him therefore the warning was unnecessary: but the other was less hurt, and in piteous tones he promised to remain quiet, imploring that his life would be spared.

At the same moment that the postilions were hurled to the ground by two of the assailants, the traces were cut by a third, and the horses at once stood still. Simultaneously also were both the doors of the chaise hastily torn open; and at each door appeared an individual thrusting pistols into the interior.

The sudden movement which the two police-agents made to tear open their coats and draw forth the weapons with which they were armed, was instantaneously frustrated by Jocelyn, who threw himself with all his force upon them, and thus succeeded in encumbering and restraining their actions for a few moments, while the two individuals who appeared at the doors, aided him in completely overpowering them. To drag them forth into the road—bind them with stout cords—take their weapons from them and toss them to a distance,—all this was now the work of a minute; and no sooner was it over when Jocelyn's friends hurried him along with them up one of the branches of the cross-road, where the two saddle-horses and the dashing phaeton appeared.

"Now away, with the speed of the whirlwind!" exclaimed one who seemed to be the leader of the party, and who by the hasty glance which Jocelyn threw upon him in the moonlight, seemed to answer to the old nurse's description of the elderly gentleman with the brown wig and the red whiskers. "Up into the phaeton," he cried, seizing Loftus by the arm and literally thrusting him on to the front seat. "Now, Captain, where are you?"

"Here, my lord," instantaneously responded a stentorian voice; and the individual who thus spoke, sprang at the same time upon the back of one of the saddle-horses: then in a still louder tone, he cried, "Robin?"

"Here, sir," was the reply: and the person who now spoke leapt up behind the phaeton, where another of the band also ensconsed himself.

All was haste and bustle, but no confusion. The Captain, be it remembered, had mounted one saddle-horse: the other was at the same time bestridden by its owner. The personage in the brown wig, and who had been addressed as "my lord," seized the reins of the phaeton and took his seat as driver—and then the whole cavalcade, consisting of saddle-horses and equipage, sped away at a tremendous rate.

CHAPTER XCV.

EDITHA.

It was on the fifth evening after the incidents just related; and if we peep into the Countess of Curzon's bourdoir between eight and nine o'clock, we shall observe her ladyship occupied with the elegant mysteries of the toilette. And yet the word *mysteries* scarcely applies in the present instance: for no need had Editha of cosmetics, sophistications, or adventitious appliances to enhance the natural splendour of her charms.

No succedaneous enamel was required for those pearly teeth that were without spot or blemish and which shone between the lips that were full and red as a luscious fruit of the tropics: no art could shed upon the cheeks the hue of a richer carnation than that which the warm blood itself gave in its mantling glow;—no dye nor factitious confection could crown the dark hair with a brighter glory than its own purply glossiness. And though the complexion of this lady was of oriental duskiness, yet would it have been a very folly and a shame to have endeavoured to mitigate its dark beauty by the appliance of aught whiter or make that skin fairer. For that soft and delicate tint of bronze—the softest and most delicate that can possibly be conceived—gave her the appearance of the warm Andalusian or glowing Italian,—as if she were one of the impassioned daughters of the sunny south!

Her eyes, so dark and yet so full of living lustre, seemed like ebony condensing all the brilliancy of diamonds: as suns they appeared to burn those who gazed upon them—and, as suns also, did they seem as if worlds of bliss and realms of paradise lay concealed in the depths of their glory!

She had chosen for her evening toilette a rich satin dress of a shining amber colour, and which

seemed to array her in the brightness of a robe made of golden tissue. The low body left her polished shoulders entirely bare, and revealed sufficient of the bust to show the sculptural contours of the round, fair, and well-detached bosoms. The naked arms had a graceful curve which admirably became their perfect modelling; and though the skirt of the shining robe was so ample, yet did its plaits and folds afford an external indication of the symmetry which it concealed. Thus the shape of the lower limbs might be conjectured — aye, followed and delineated by the mind's eye, especially when the imagination was assisted by the exquisite conformation of the foot and ankle that peeped from beneath the satin dress.

Pearls set off the purple glossiness of her luxuriant hair — and pearls also marked with their delicate tracery the roundness of her swan-like neck. Nothing could exceed the glowing appearance of the Countess of Curzon in that dark oriental loveliness which made her seem like a houri fresh from the sensualities and luxuriousness of Mahomet's paradise. All the brilliance of beauty, the grace of motion, and the seductiveness of look which ever combined to render woman alike charming and dangerous, now mingled all the magic of their spells wherewith to invest the Countess of Curzon.

In the brilliant toilette which Editha had just achieved, she was efficiently assisted by the faithful Gertrude, her principal lady's-maid. This young woman, who was herself exceedingly beautiful, was devotedly attached to her mistress—not merely because she was a confidant in Lady Curzon's intrigues, nor because she was well remunerated for her complicity, but because she really loved the Countess for her own sake, with a rare amount of disinterested affection.

"Your ladyship never appeared more beautiful than you are to-night," said Gertrude, as she threw a rich ermine cloak over the shoulders of her mistress.

"I am glad you tell me so, my dear girl," replied Editha, laughing gaily; "for I know that you are impartial. And now remember what I have told you ——"

"Your ladyship knows," said Gertrude, with a meaning look, "that I always attend to your ladyship's commands."

"You do, my dear girl," observed the Countess, tapping her caressingly on the cheek, "and you are aware that there is nothing I will not do to serve you in return. Whenever you find a husband that will suit you," added Editha with a gay smile, "I shall take care of your dowry."

"Oh! there is time enough to think of *that*," exclaimed Gertrude. "I do not wish to quit your ladyship's service, even to be married——"

"But you must not lend a willing ear to the idle flatteries of men," said Editha. "Wait till you are married, Gertrude, and then you can do anything —gratifying every phantasy and yielding to every whim. But in the meantime, prudence should lead you to be what the world calls virtuous. At all events," she added, with a gay laugh and with a look singularly full of wickedness and arch significance, "do not yield to the honied words of my husband."

"Oh! was not that farce an amusing one?" cried Gertrude, bursting into a peel of the merriest laughter, while her own looks also expressed a roguish meaning. "It was better than any play at a theatre: such equivoques! But when will his lordship return home?"

"I do not know exactly," responded Editha. "In a few days, I presume. He told me that he was going to France on some sudden and pressing business. Whether it be true or not, I cannot say. But 'tis now nine o'clock, and I must be off to Lady Lechmere's."

The Countess thereupon issued forth from her boudoir, and descended the stairs with the splendid ermine cloak flowing loosely around her. When at the bottom of the staircase she looked up; and perceiving that Gertrude was leaning over the balusters of the landing above, Editha gave the abigail a parting look of deep meaning, which was responded to by one of equally vivid intelligence. Lady Curzon then entered the carriage, and was driven to Lady Lechmere's abode in North Audley Street.

The brilliant saloons of this mansion were already crowded when Editha made her appearance: but amongst all the blaze of beauty and fashion there assembled, no female scion of the aristocracy was more remarkable for the loveliness of her person and the elegance of her attire, than Lady Curzon. Immediately on entering, she was surrounded by a host of admirers: and assuredly that was a moment of proud triumph for the charming patrician lady, to perceive that many rivals were deserted by their fickle gallants, who now hastened to pay their homage to herself.

Lady Lechmere was a widow on the shady side of forty: and notwithstanding the disparity of their years, Lady Curzon being only six-and-twenty, the closest friendship existed between them.

Amongst the brilliant company thus assembled at Lady Lechmere's, perhaps the only one of the male sex, who could not boast of being descended either from some Norman cut-throat Baron, or from some vile harlot of the reign of Charles II, —and who could not produce a genealogical tree containing a thousand names, or a coat of arms interwoven with the mosaic work of endless quarterings,—the only man, in fact, who had no *prestige* of high birth, lofty rank, and proud title to recommend him to the notice of the fashionable world, was Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. It was true, that if he possessed an office in the dingy regions of the City, he likewise owned a splendid house at Clapham; and that if he had no aristocratic title to embellish his name, at all events he had the reputation of enjoying an immense fortune. Nevertheless, these circumstances would not have sufficed as an introduction into the exclusive circles of the West End, had not some other influence been exercised in order to throw open the gilded portals of fashion to admit him within the sphere of that roseate scene of luxury.

What, then, had proved the talisman to open these doors to the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane?—what was the mysterious *sesame* which had produced this magic effect? It was to the Countess of Curzon that Emmerson was indebted for the extraordinary privilege which he thus enjoyed. In plain terms, Editha had become his mistress!

Possessed of the forged bills, Emmerson had experienced but little trouble in coercing her; and when once she had abandoned herself to him in

order to regain possession of those documents, she found that he was prepared to behave towards her with the utmost munificence. Steeped in debt—extravagant to a degree—having a thousand wants and no means of gratifying them, inasmuch as her tradesmen refused further credit, and she could obtain but little money from her husband, Lady Curzon eagerly availed herself of the proposals made by her City friend; and in return for the gold with which he profusely supplied her, she rewarded him as liberally with her favours. But to avert suspicion and avoid the chance of scandal, Editha had not herself been the direct means of introducing the bill-broker into fashionable circles. Lady Lechmere, who was privy to her friend's intrigue, had cheerfully undertaken this task. Accordingly, Emmerson had first appeared as the guest of Lady Lechmere; and therefore the supposition was, that in this capacity had he been introduced to Lady Curzon, and thus formed her acquaintance.

The reader has already seen that Emmerson was a veritable money-grubber—stern and implacable in his financial dealings—intensely selfish, unprincipled, and hollow-hearted. But he had become completely infatuated with Lady Curzon. Not only did her extraordinary beauty and her glowing temperament exercise a magic influence over a man of strong sensuality and licentious ardour; but his vanity was also supremely flattered in possessing so aristocratic a mistress. When he beheld that woman of dazzling beauty, elegant manners, and brilliant accomplishments, enter the ball-room in all the glory, pride, and effulgence of her rank and her loveliness, he felt that it was worth any sacrifice to be enabled to say to himself, "That woman—the cynosure of all admiration—the centre of all regards—the object of all devotion—that woman is mine!" Then, on accosting her and being received with a smile, all the sweetness of which was not allowed to appear in the presence of observers, but was shed upon him as it were in the furtiveness of a rapid sidelong look,—to feel that while men of the proudest titles and loftiest rank, were gazing with admiration, passion, and desire upon that lady of warm and glowing beauty,—to feel, we say, that he, the mere citizen, without birth or aristocratic halo, was the master of all those charms,—this was indeed flattering to the pride of a vain, conceited, self-sufficient, and to some extent weak-minded person, such as Emmerson.

But he had the good sense not to accost her the moment she entered the room—not to obtrude himself upon her, nor pointedly thrust himself amidst the aristocratic circle of gallants by whom she was immediately surrounded: much less did he attempt to elbow away any one who for a moment might appear to be enacting the part of rivalry. With consummate duplicity Editha had made him believe that she really loved him, and that it was not his gold which purchased her favours, but that he himself was the object of her disinterested affection. Strong, therefore, in the conceit with which she had thus imbued him, and to which his infatuation rendered him so easily accessible, he exhibited no jealousy when he saw her smiling upon others who were really handsome and possessed of qualifications calculated to win a woman's heart. Quietly biding his time, as it were, he waited until the first dazzling effects of her presence had passed away, and when the evening was somewhat more advanced and her admirers began to flit about elsewhere: then was it that Mr. Emmerson availed himself of the opportunity to approach Editha, and take a seat by her side.

For a short time they conversed together upon indifferent topics: but presently Lady Curzon rose, saying with a smile, "Give me your arm, and let us visit the card-room for a few minutes."

Thither they accordingly proceeded: it was not however, to gaze upon the card-players, nor to observe what was going on in this room that Lady Curzon had desired to be conducted thither; but it was because there were comparatively few persons in this apartment, and therefore it was more easy to converse without restraint. Accordingly, seating themselves on a sofa at a distance from the card-players, the aristocratic lady and her citizen paramour began to discourse in a confidential manner.

"You are truly beautiful to-night, Editha," said Emmerson, gazing with unfeigned rapture upon the charming creature who affected to love him.

"And you also appear to great advantage," she replied, although in reality his sallow complexion, hard features, and looks denoting the driver of close bargains, filled her with a disgust which only a consummate duplicity enabled her to conceal.

"And is it possible," he said, drinking intoxication from her glances,—"is it possible that *you*—the courted, the caressed, and the brilliant idol of fashion—really love *me*, the unpretending, unassuming man of business?"

"You know that I love you," she answered, fixing upon him a look that seemed full of passion, while her magnificent eyes vibrated like stars. "Have I not shown you that I love you? do I not incur constant risks in order that I may lavish upon you the proofs of my affection?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Emmerson, his head losing itself in the ebriety of his feelings. "But will you always love me thus?"

"Do you doubt it?" she asked, her looks assuming an expression of mournful reproach.

"But did you not love your husband when you first married him?—then did you not love Colonel Malpas?" asked Emmerson softly.

"Oh! mention not the name of that vile wretch!" exclaimed Editha, the glow of indignation suffusing her splendid countenance and dyeing even her neck and bosom with its mantling vividness. "But yes—we will speak of him for one moment," she observed, checking her wrathful feelings as a sentiment of curiosity suddenly inspired her: "and that is in order that I may ask what has become of him?"

"He is still an inmate of the King's Bench," answered Emmerson. "He has made two or three endeavours to release himself by what is called bail; but the securities proposed have never been accepted by the judge—and therefore he still lingers in prison."

"Where I hope you intend to keep him as long as you can," said Lady Curzon, with the evident bitterness of a deeply cherished vengeance.

"Depend upon it, Editha, I will keep him there

as long as I am able," returned Emmerson. "Indeed, were he my own brother or father, if he had given offence to *you*, he should be punished with all possible severity."

"You seem never wearied of giving me proofs of your affection," said Lady Curzon. "And yet I am always taking advantage of your kindness—your goodness towards me. Indeed, this very night have I a favour to ask——"

"Name it, name it, dear Editha," said the infatuated Emmerson: "tell me what I can do to prove my devotion."

"Most humiliating and distressing for me is it to speak of money matters," said Lady Curzon, affecting to be overwhelmed with confusion: "but you know how I am situated——".

"Say not another word," interrupted the bill-broker. "But may I not have the pleasure—the ineffable pleasure—of writing you a cheque this very night for what you may require, so that your faithful Gertrude may procure you the amount at my banker's the first thing in the morning? Will you not, I ask, afford me that opportunity?" he urged with a look of deep meaning and in a tone of impassioned entreaty.

"Ah! can you not imagine that I have already made the necessary arrangements?" said Editha, with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, while she played archly and coquettishly with her fan.

"Yes—I dared to anticipate this happiness—this renewed experience of paradise!" returned Emmerson: "and therefore I am not expected home at Clapham to-night."

"Gertrude will come hither at midnight," said Editha, with a look of intelligence: "half-an-hour afterwards you must be at the corner of the street with a hackney-coach."

Emmerson threw upon his charming mistress a look of intoxicated delight; and they then quitted the card-room, returning to the more spacious saloons where the dancing was in progress. Here they separated for the present,—Emmerson joining a group of gentlemen with whom he was well acquainted, inasmuch as their promissory notes were all in his strong box in Nicholas Lane,—while, on the other hand, the Countess of Curzon accepted an invitation from some nobleman to join the dance.

A little after midnight Editha watched an opportunity to steal away, unperceived, from the brilliant throng in the splendid saloons: and ascending a staircase, she threaded a long carpetted passage with the air of one to whom the place was quite familiar. Opening a door at the end of this passage, she entered a bed-chamber where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and wax-tapers were already lighted upon the table. Her own ermine cloak was likewise there, lying upon the bed.

Carefully locking the door by which she had entered, Editha opened another one exactly facing it. This second door communicated with a back staircase, feebly lighted by a suspended lamp. For a few minutes the Countess remained standing at the head of this staircase, as if in expectation of some arrival. Such was the case. A small bell was heard to tinkle: and at the signal—for a signal it assuredly was—Editha hastily descended the staircase and unlocked a door at the bottom. This door opened into a bye street; and a female figure, muffled in an ample cloak and wearing a thick black veil, at once crossed the threshold.

The door was closed and locked again; and Editha, followed by the muffled figure, hastened up into the bed-chamber. The new-comer now threw off her bonnet, veil, and cloak, and revealed the bewitching person of Miss Gertrude, the lady's-maid.

A somewhat singular scene now took place: for on the one hand, Lady Curzon began to put off her magnificent apparel, while on the other hand Gertrude likewise proceeded to undress herself. Had any concealed observer been nigh, and in a position to peep at all that was going on, he could not fail to have noticed that the lady and the lady's-maid were exactly of the same height, but that the figure and bust of Gertrude were the least thing fuller and more swelling than the lighter symmetry of her mistress. Nevertheless, the garments of the one would fit the other—as was indeed very soon shown on the present occasion: for while Editha assumed the modest apparel of her dependant, the latter proceeded to deck herself in the brilliant vesture of the Countess. Even to the very pearls and other ornaments did Gertrude take as it were the place of her mistress; and during the exchange of garments a great deal of roguish laughter and a great many sly looks passed between the lady and the lady's-maid.

At length, when these mysterious toilettes were completed, Editha assisted Gertrude to envelope herself in the splendid ermine cloak, the hood of which the girl drew so completely over her countenance as most effectually to shade it. She then issued from the chamber—not by the private door and back staircase by which she had entered, but by the other door opening upon the long carpetted passage.

Thus apparelled in the shining amber-coloured robe and enveloped in the splendid ermine cloak, with a stray curl or two of her own beautiful jetty hair peeping forth from beneath the hood, Gertrude might well indeed have been taken for the Countess of Curzon. To enact this part was all the more easy, inasmuch as at that particular period the cloak-hoods were entirely the fashion for ladies, on issuing forth from balls, parties, theatres, &c; and like the Spanish mantillas or the Turkish veils, they were used so completely to conceal the countenance as to afford no mean auxiliary to the intrigues of gallantry.

Lady Lechmere, who was deep in all the secrets of her friend Editha, was waiting on the first landing for the appearance of the disguised Gertrude; and making a signal to a servant who stood in the hall below, the cry of "Lady Curzon's carriage!" was immediately sent forth into the street.

"Now, my dear Countess," said Lady Lechmere, as she accompanied the disguised Gertrude down the stairs, and thence through the hall as far as the very threshold of the mansion—"you do well to wrap yourself up in this manner: the night is bitterly cold—and coming out of hot rooms, it is enough to give you your death, susceptible of the chill as you are. Good night, my dear Countess," she exclaimed more loudly still.

And Gertrude, enacting the part of the said Countess, shook Lady Lechmere by the hand with every appearance of the most friendly cordiality:

then tripping lightly into the carriage, she was whirled away to Grosvenor Street.

In the meantime the real Countess of Curzon, completely disguised in Gertrude's apparel—wearing the ample cloak and the thick veil of that complaisant lady's-maid—descended the private staircase, and emerged by the side-door into the bye-street, at the corner of which Mr. Emmerson was waiting with a hackney-coach. Into the vehicle they got, and were driven as far as Oxford Street, where they alighted; and thence they proceeded on foot to Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of infamy in Soho Square.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE LADY'S-MAID.

THE carriage in which Gertrude was seated, arrived in a few minutes at Curzon House, Grosvenor Street. The watchful hall-porter, on the alert for his noble mistress's return, immediately opened the front door; and Gertrude, with the cloak-hood drawn over her countenance, issued from the carriage, ascended the stone steps in front of the mansion, and was passing rapidly through the hall towards the staircase, when the hall-porter said, "Please your ladyship, my lord has come back."

If death were really a phantom that appeared to those whom it was about to bear away from the realms of earth, then not even the presence of the grim destroyer suddenly starting up before the young lady's-maid, would have caused her so mortal a terror as this announcement which the porter made. It struck upon her brain like the blow of a hammer—pierced her heart with the pang of a fiery arrow—and then the next moment sent an ice-chill quivering through her entire frame. Her feet suddenly appeared to become heavy as lead, and refused to perform their office. As one who in a night-mare seeks to fly from some hideous object, but fancies that he has not the power to drag his limbs along, so was it with Gertrude. But still, while thus transfixed to the spot, and leaning against the hall-table to prevent herself from falling, she tenaciously kept the ermine hood closed over her countenance.

The hall-porter, being overcome with drowsiness, had hurried away into the side-room where he slept: and thus he did not observe that his announcement of the Earl's return had produced any extraordinary effect upon her whom he of course believed to be the Countess herself.

But the Earl, who had heard the carriage stop and the front door open, now issued forth from the dining-room where he had been sitting; and the sudden appearance of the nobleman startled Gertrude into new life, and not only relieved her feet from the leaden sensation that had paralysed their power, but gave to them the fleetest wings.

"Well, Editha," said the Earl, as he issued from the dining-room; "not a word of welcome?—not a syllable of any kind? Not even a look of recognition?"

But his lordship suddenly stopped short in mingled astonishment and dismay: for Gertrude flew rather than walked towards the stairs, up which she bounded with such a marvellous agility that she was out of sight in a moment.

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, a whole hurricane of suspicions sweeping through his brain: and away in pursuit of the fugitive did he rush.

As he was half-way up the stairs he heard a door closed violently and locked as suddenly up above. Conjecturing that it was the door of his wife's boudoir, he hastened thither—and, as he expected, found it fast.

"Editha, open this door—I insist upon it!" he said, with his lips at the keyhole so as to speak only in a whisper that might not be overheard by any of the other members of the household.

No answer was returned—and the Earl spoke not only louder, but in a more menacing tone. Still there was no response. The Earl's suspicions became a thousand times more poignant, though not more definite: at all events he could conjecture nothing but that there must have been a lover concealed in his wife's boudoir, and that in a sudden panic-terror she had rushed up to screen him. He accordingly threatened to force the door unless it were immediately unlocked.

Gertrude, half-wild with alarm, saw that another moment's delay would produce a fearful scandal throughout the house: and she therefore unlocked the door. She had thrown off the ermine cloak, but still remained in the ball costume. Pale as death—her half-exposed bosom heaving convulsively, and her hands joined in entreaty—she fell upon her knees as the Earl entered the boudoir.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, as he at once recognised the beautiful lady's-maid.

But Gertrude could give no response: the truth she dared not tell—and no falsehood came ready-made to her lips in that moment of indescribable terror. Speechless therefore did she remain, but gazing up at her astounded and bewildered master with so frightened and deprecating a regard that it showed she expected little mercy at his hands.

The Earl of Curzon closed the door of the boudoir, and leaning back against it, gazed down in speechless astonishment upon the kneeling girl. There she was—clad in the splendid raiment of her mistress, and with Editha's pearls, too, on her hair and round her neck! Yes—and she had returned home muffled up in Editha's own ermine cloak! But it was impossible that she could have personated the Countess at Lady Lechmere's grand entertainment: she must have assumed that dress *after* her mistress had figured in it at the ball, and she must have come home thus disguised in the carriage in order to afford Editha an opportunity of remaining out elsewhere!

Such were the Earl's reflections. Yes—he saw it all: the manœuvre was palpable enough! And now, too, did a cloud of recollections gush in unto his mind, and a light simultaneously broke upon them, clearing up all that was mysterious therein before. The incidents of *that night* when for the *first* time he suspected his wife's fidelity, all sprang up as vividly to his mind's eye as if they were just being enacted over again!

And what were the incidents of that memorable night? Be it remembered that on the occasion to which we must thus retrospect, the Earl of Curzon had entered a hackney-coach and planted himself immediately opposite his own mansion, in order to watch Editha's movements, and that he saw a female

figure, cloaked and veiled, enter the private carriage and drive away. In the hackney-coach he had followed the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and had seen the veiled figure enter her ladyship's mansion. Then he was satisfied that it was his wife whom he had been watching. It must next be remembered that on returning home on foot, he had encountered *another* veiled and cloaked figure, whom he had fancied to be Gertrude; and when he endeavoured to engage her in conversation and make love to her, she at first mutely rejected his overtures and then screamed out.

These were the incidents over which the Earl retrospected; and he was *now* convinced that on that occasion there had been an exchange of apparel, and that it was really *Gertrude* whom he had seen proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and *his own Countess* whom he had importuned with his overtures in the street!

That such had indeed been the case he was *now* the more convinced, on calling to mind certain other little incidents that had occurred on the same evening. And what were they? First, he had thought to meet his wife in the hall when the carriage came back; but she whom he then took to be his wife, had flitted past him, rushed up-stairs, and disappeared from his view. Almost immediately after, be it recollected, he had seen *her whom he took for Gertrude* hastening up the stairs, and overtaking her he had again addressed some words to her—but she had broken away and bounded up the stairs. This second equivoque, as it then happened, and as he *now* read it, appeared entirely confirmatory of the fact that the lady and the lady's-maid had changed apparel on the memorable evening alluded to, and that he had in reality taken Gertrude for his wife and his wife for Gertrude!

All these recollections and the construction which he now put upon the incidents themselves, were the subject of not more than a few moments' reflection, though we have taken several minutes to recapitulate the circumstances and make the explanation apparent to the reader. To the Earl it was speedily clear as daylight: he saw it all—understood it all; for the complete clue to those incidents of *the past* was now afforded by the startling exposure of the intrigues of *the present!*

Gertrude, who was kneeling at his feet, had no difficulty in understanding from the varied though rapid expression which swept over his countenance, what was passing in his mind: and now the keen sense of all the tremendous dangers which threatened her mistress, inspired the girl, who neither lacked heroism nor artfulness, with a resolution to save her if possible.

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, rising from her knees, but still maintaining her hands clasped; "forgive me—pardon me—if I have dared to assume a dress belonging to her ladyship! I know that it was very wrong—most arrogant and presumptuous on my part——"

"Ah! Miss Gertrude," interrupted the Earl, with a bitter irony in his accents; "the artifice is ingenious, but it will not succeed. 'Tis true that you might have borrowed the Countess's dress: but how came the Countess's carriage to bring you home from Lady Lechmere's?"

Thus speaking, with a voice and look showing that he was not to be deceived, he pushed hastily by the discomfited girl, and seized upon Edith's writing-desk which stood upon a table. On the former occasion when he had searched that desk, be it remembered, one of his own keys fitted it; and he now therefore had no difficulty in opening the desk again.

"Her ladyship is lost!" thought Gertrude within herself, as in cruel alarm she contemplated the Earl's proceeding: for the abigail was pretty well assured that the desk would furnish proofs of her ladyship's amours. Resolved to save the Countess, however, at any risk, and indeed at any sacrifice if it were possible, Gertrude advanced up to the table, and seizing her noble master's hand, she said in a low deep tone, "I conjure your lordship not to consummate this outrage against your innocent wife, nor give way to any suspicions which my folly and indiscretion may have excited!"

The Earl was too much tortured by the pangs of jealousy to experience any flaming up of a sensual passion, through the contact of that soft warm hand which was thus purposely placed in contact with his own: but looking up, he met the earnest and imploring gaze which the pretty abigail's dark eyes fixed upon him. Then suddenly recollecting that on the former occasion of his suspicions being awakened against his wife, he had resolved to win over Gertrude to his interest if possible—and therefore seizing the present opportunity,—he suddenly took both her hands in his own, and assuming a tender look, said, "My dear girl, you are deep in the confidence of your mistress: tell me everything, and I swear that I will always be your friend. I will never desert you—I will place you in a comfortable position, and will bestow upon you as much of my love as it is in my nature to experience or be able to give."

Thus speaking, he drew Gertrude towards him and passed his arm around her waist. The young woman not only suffered herself to be thus treated with a tenderness that might not probably stop there, but actually encouraged him to take farther advantage of the opportunity, the circumstances, and the hour: for she pressed closer to him, gazing up into his countenance with looks that at first only simulated an amorous feeling, but speedily began to swim with the wanton langour of really nascent desires. Indeed, when first she placed her hand in contact with that of the Earl, it was as a provocative to his passions—the execution of a sudden resolve to throw herself in as a means of diverting his attention from the pursuit on which it was fixed, and thus by her own sacrifice endeavour to save the Countess. At the same time, it must be confessed that Gertrude's sense of virtue was not very strong, inasmuch as she could so readily make up her mind to immolate her own honour in the hope of screening that of her mistress.

"Well, what reply do you mean to give me?" asked the nobleman, now pressing his lips to her's, "Will you transfer your devotion from the Countess to me? will you, in fact, give me your love and become worthy of mine? Tell me, Gertrude—what am I to expect from you?—what will you do?"

"My lord, my lord," she murmured, now seeking as it were to nestle in his bosom, "I have nothing to reveal that could in any way compromise her ladyship. But come—let us leave this boudoir—and if you wish, I will accompany you to your own room——"

"Ah! Gertrude," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, who at any other time would have been worked up to a frenzy of desire by the contact of those voluptuous charms and by the provocative looks of the young girl who seemed ready to abandon her virgin innocence to his embrace: but other and fiercer fires were now consuming him—and the temptations of the siren wanton were ineffectual upon a heart scorching with the hell of its unappeasable jealousies. "Ah! Gertrude," he exclaimed, extricating himself from the half-embrace in which she had enfolded him,—"you are in league with your mistress—too much so, I fear, to enable you to devote yourself to me!"

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, as the tears of mingled vexation and wounded pride rolled down her cheeks, "I thought that you did care for me a little; but now I perceive that you only sought to trifle with me——"

"Ah! I am afraid that 'tis I who have been trifled with," exclaimed the Earl bitterly: and at the same time he began dragging forth the contents of Editha's writing-desk.

Gertrude saw that farther remonstrance and artifice were unavailing; and smarting under a deep sense of humiliation at the rejection of the overtures which she had so pointedly made, she stood by in sullen silence. Not only was she vexed at the failure of her artifice; but her natural woman's-pride was hurt and wounded.

"Here!" suddenly exclaimed the Earl, after turning over a number of letters of no particular consequence, but at length lighting upon that very self-same one which had aroused his suspicions on the former occasion: "here!" he cried, tossing it to Gertrude—"take and read this, and then persist in telling me, if you dare, that you are not in the confidence of your mistress."

The girl took the note which was thus angrily and contemptuously flung at her, and read its contents as follow:—

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you a reply by Gertrude. Yes—I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servant shall receive orders *to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon.* But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,

"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

Eagerly and intently did the Earl of Curzon watch the countenance of Gertrude as she perused that billet; and the girl felt the tell-tale blush stealing over her countenance—a blush which, were it to seal her doom, she had not the power to restrain. Besides, she was hurt at the moment at the doubt implied in the note relative to her own trust-worthiness: but a second thought showed her that the Countess was not blameable for what Lady Lechmere wrote.

"Now, young woman, will you confess?" said the Earl, as he took back the note from her hand: "or will you dare my vengeance by your obstinacy?"

"I know nothing about it, my lord—I know nothing about it! You may kill me," she added, with hysterical vehemence; "but I shall confess nothing, because there is nothing to confess."

"We shall see," muttered the Earl, with concentrated passion; and he continued his examination of the contents of the writing-desk.

One after another he glanced at the papers and tossed them aside; but presently he drew forth an envelope addressed to the Countess in a bold mercantile hand and with the word "Private" in the corner.

Hastily opening this packet, the Earl discovered that it contained several bills of exchange, the acceptances of which at first struck him to be his own: but perceiving that they were drawn by Percy Malpas, he instantaneously knew that he had never put his name to such securities at all in favour of the Colonel. A closer examination showed him that the acceptance, written in his own name, was a forgery; and on looking at the back he perceived the endorsement of Emmerson. Ten thousand demons now appeared to be tearing at the Earl's heart, while vulture-talons were fastening upon his brain, as some portion of the truth became revealed to his comprehension. For he saw—he understood—he comprehended but too well that it was his wife who had forged his name to those bills, and the forgery had been perpetrated in favour of Colonel Malpas: then what else could he surmise but that the Colonel had been Editha's paramour?

Poor Gertrude now indeed felt more than ever convinced that her beloved mistress was lost without redemption. She knew of those bills—knew that Emmerson had sent them back—recollected that the packet had been delivered one day to the Countess when seated in the boudoir with two or three lady-friends—and remembered also that Editha had hurriedly consigned that packet to her desk at the moment, with the intention of destroying its contents when alone. But the oversight on Editha's part in neglecting to do so, now threatened to prove fatal indeed; and the poor girl, as all these thoughts swept through her brain, trembled to the deepest confines of her whole being.

The Earl of Curzon had become ghastly pale,—so that his naturally handsome countenance was now almost hideous to gaze upon, while the sinister light that shone in his eyes bespoke terrible plans of vengeance already revolving in his mind. Flinging a fearfully sardonic look upon Gertrude, but without breathing a word, he secured Lady Lechmere's note and the packet of forged bills about his person; and finding no other document of any consequence in the writing-desk, he tossed back the various letters and papers which he had disturbed, but without giving himself the trouble to re-lock the desk. There was now no necessity to attempt any concealment as to the search which he had instituted!

But he did not immediately leave the room: he appeared to hesitate what course to pursue. He looked at Gertrude—not with the gaze of desire—no heart had he at this moment for tender thoughts or sensual pursuits: his outraged honour and his wife's crimes were the all-engrossing subject of his thoughts—the all-powerful influence that enchained his heart's keenest emotions! But he fixed his eyes upon Gertrude for a few moments, to ascertain whether there were any signs of contrition about her—whether, in a word, there was any chance of her turning against her mistress. But though her countenance was also pale as his own, it nevertheless expressed naught save a moody sullenness, mingled with an expression of hatred,—as if on the one hand she knew the case

was desperate so far as her mistress was concerned, but that on the other she longed to wreak her vengeance upon the Earl himself for having discovered his wife's perfidy.

The nobleman was too proud to reiterate his proposals to a girl who gave him no encouragement to do so; and he was about to quit the boudoir, when he suddenly recollected that Gertrude might steal out of the house and warn Editha of what was in store for her—thereby preparing her to meet a storm which the Earl was desirous should burst with overwhelming suddenness upon her head. Accordingly, throwing another significant glance upon the abigail, he said with a cold irony, "Since you are so fond of personating your mistress with regard to her dress, Gertrude, you may now occupy her place in this boudoir till the morning: for I suppose that she purposes to remain abroad all night."

Having thus spoken, the Earl of Curzon stalked out of the room, locking the door and taking the key with him.

CHAPTER XCVII.

INTREPIDITY.

When thus left alone, Gertrude stood gazing in dull vacancy for some moments upon the writing-desk which had furnished the proofs of Editha's criminality. Slowly awakening from this stupor of mingled dread and dismay, the abigail began to lay aside the splendid apparel in which she was decorated. Depositing the pearls and the ornaments upon the toilette table, she put off the amber-coloured robe, and then negligently and irresolutely began to comb out her long dark hair.

But it was evident that she was revolving some idea in her mind, and that whether she should retire to rest or carry out this idea constituted the indecision in which she was hovering. Laying down the comb, she seated herself upon a sofa; and supporting her well-shaped head upon her really beautiful hand, she began seriously to deliberate upon the risks and chances of the project which every moment was becoming more firmly settled in her mind. Her naturally mischievous eyes were now full of a serious expression,—while her cherry lips became compressed with the firmness which is characteristic of a heroine. It was evident that she was revolving some desperate or dangerous scheme: and indeed, if she were just now over ready to yield up her honour in the hope of diverting the Earl's attention from the proceedings of the Countess, she was now as devotedly resolving to risk her life in order to serve that mistress whom she loved so well!

Suddenly starting from her recumbent posture and from her deep reverie, she glanced towards the time-piece which stood upon the mantle; but that clock had stopped, and she knew not what hour it was. But calculating that it was about one o'clock when she had returned from Lady Lechmere's—that the scene with the Earl had occupied half-an-hour—and that a similar interval had elapsed since his departure from the room, she argued that it must now be two o'clock in the morning. Her calculation as to the time was by no means a trivial thing, even in the midst of the important considerations that were crowding through her mind. The fact was that the watchman of the district invariably passed along Grosvenor Street about ten minutes past every hour throughout the night; and the project which the venturous damsel had in view, could not very well be carried out with success if the aforesaid nocturnal guardian happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

Supposing it, therefore, to be about two o'clock, she reckoned that if she let twenty minutes pass, she would be ensuring the safety of her scheme: and winding up the time-piece. she set it going. She now opened the drawers—took forth all the splendid cachmere shawls and the strongest satin scarves belonging to her mistress—and these she rolled up lengthwise into the form of a rope, fastening them together. Remorselessly and unhesitatingly did she thus treat those handsome articles of apparel which in the aggregate cost hundreds of guineas—twisting and knotting them just as ruthlessly as if they were old rags: but then she had in view a certain project the success of which was a matter outweighing the price of all the finery in the world!

In this manner full twenty minutes were passed; and then the damsel prepared to carry her bold design into execution. First she pushed a heavy chest of drawers up against the window; and completely round this ponderous piece of furniture did she pass the rope which she had made, not fastening it, but allowing it to run loosely as if over the wheel of a pulley. Then, against the chest of drawers she placed the sofa, a great arm-chair, and other things to keep it firm and steady;—and all this being done, she returned again to the ransacking of her mistress's wardrobe. But this time it was for some fitting garment to put on. Enveloping herself in the darkest coloured cloak she could find, and selecting the simplest straw-bonnet that presented itself, she now entered upon the crowning act of this night's strange drama.

Gently opening the lower part of the window, she listened for a few moments—and no sound of human voice nor footfall reached her ears. Then she peeped forth—and by the mingled moon-light and lamp-light she was enabled to assure herself that the street was entirely deserted. All was still: not a light was even visible at any opposite window. Now, then, was the moment—now the opportunity. Nor did the heroic Gertrude shrink from the danger of her self-imposed task—appalling though that peril must have seemed to be, notwithstanding the marvellous intrepidity of her soul.

Having extinguished the light in the boudoir, she flung forth the rope in such a manner that it was doubled, both ends descending towards the pavement below: she then passed out of the window—and firmly clutching the double rope in both hands, while her feet clung to it also, she began to lower herself with amazing presence of mind. But scarcely had she thus commenced her fearful descent, when the straw-bonnet flew from her head and the cloak became detached from her person,—thus leaving her in a state of semi-nudity and her hair all flowing wildly. The slanting moon-beams of silver played upon the countenance that expressed all the decision of a heroine—upon the bare bosom which remained upheaved with a strong feeling of suspense—and on the naked arms, so

white and well-rounded, which clung with such tenacity to the double rope. Fortunate perhaps was it for the damsel that she got rid of the encumbrance of the ample cloak, the folds of which might only have embarrassed the nimble play of her delicate feet and robust legs as she slid gently down. Her lithe form, possessing all the suppleness of a Bayadere and the elasticity of a serpent, seemed to adapt itself yieldingly to the swaying of the rope and to every movement that she herself made in her perilous descent; nor less was it apparent that if with a perfect symmetry she blended great muscular power, to her love for her mistres she also united an extraordinary moral courage.

But 'tis done!—her delicate feet touch the pavement—and she stands safely in the street! A minute has scarcely elapsed since she crept forth from the window above! The moment she thus stands upon firm ground, she picks up the cloak and the bonnet, and her semi-nude form is again enveloped in the capacious mantle, while her disordered hair is gathered up hastily beneath the straw-hat. Then she takes the end of one length of the rope only, and by pulling it towards her, draws it down from the chest of drawers in the boudoir, just as a rope passes over a drum-wheel when one end is detached. She now coils up this rope of shawls with the utmost despatch—conceals it under her mantle—and hurries away. Thus the only outward and visible trace that is left of her exploit, is the open window of the boudoir: but being an upper one, the watchman—even if he saw it when passing by—would not think it necessary to raise an alarm on that account.

Away sped Gertrude to Soho Square: and on reaching Mrs. Gale's establishment, she was immediately admitted, some of the servants of that establishment remaining up all night. On asking for Mrs. Gale, she was told that this "lady" had retired to rest: but Gertrude, by stating that her

business was of the utmost importance, induced one of the servants to arouse the mistress of the place. Finally, after some little trouble, Gertrude was enabled to obtain an interview with Mrs. Gale: and the moment they were alone together, the damsel requested that she might see the Countess of Curzon immediately. Mrs. Gale asked if anything unpleasant had occurred; to which Gertrude replied in the affirmative, without however entering into particulars. Mrs. Gale, notwithstanding, heard enough to induce her to repair to the chamber where the Countess and Emmerson were together: and to be brief, in a few minutes Editha was conducted to the apartment where Gertrude had waited.

Mrs. Gale withdrew: and the Countess of Curzon, who had only huddled on a few clothes, exclaimed with a tone and look of poignant alarm, "Good heavens, Gertrude! what has happened?"

The abigail proceeded to narrate all that had taken place,—how the Earl had returned—how he had discovered that she was disguised in her mistress's apparel—how he had opened the desk and possessed himself of Lady Lechmere's note as well as the forged bills—how he had locked her in the boudoir—and how she had escaped thence in the manner just described.

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the thrilling, feverish, and rapid transitions of emotion through which the Countess passed, as these hurried incidents struck one after the other upon her ear. Alarm at the return of her husband—terror at the discoveries he had made—admiration of Gertrude's devoted conduct—the excitement of absolute horror at her perilous descent—and then fresh fears and apprehensions on her own account,—these were the startling and stirring feelings which in rapid succession were conjured up by Gertrude's narrative. But when the intrepid young woman displayed that coil of rope made of twisted shawls, and which she had brought thither, Editha's emotion of wonder and admiration triumphed for the instant over the more selfish sensations of alarm on her own account; and flinging her arms about the girl's neck, the Countess embraced her with the liveliest gratitude and affection.

"I thought your ladyship should know of all that has happened as speedily as possible," said Gertrude. "In the first place, I feared lest his lordship should by any accident suspect that you were here and come to seek you. Secondly, I thought that if when you returned home in the morning, disguised in my apparel and unprepared to receive the Earl, you suddenly encountered him, you would be so completely overwhelmed that no possible excuse or explanation would come to your aid. And thirdly, it struck me that if any tale can possibly be made up to save your ladyship's honour, it will be necessary to lose no time in putting Lady Lechmere on her guard, should the Earl take it into his head to call and question her. For all these reasons, I felt assured it would be better to warn you at once of what had occurred; and hence my resolve to escape from that boudoir and join you here at any risk."

"Never, never, dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, "shall I forget this more than kindness—this positive devotion—on your part. No sister would have risked a hundredth part as much for me! But what is to be done? what on earth *can* be done? Idiot, idiot that I was to leave those bills in my desk!—yes, or to leave even so slight a clue as that note which he showed you, and the contents of which you have recapitulated to me! Ah! wretched woman that I am," she cried, wringing her hands bitterly. "Like all my five sisters—like my mother—like my aunts—like every female member, in fine, of my family—am I destined to be dishonoured and disgraced! O Gertrude, Gertrude! what a scandal—what an excitement will there be in the fashionable world to-morrow when the explosion takes place!"

"But lady—dear lady," interrupted the girl, "is all this risk that I have run to be in vain? Can you devise nothing—can you think of nothing to avert the impending ruin?"

"I do not see what can be done," answered the almost distracted Editha. "Even if I could get back unperceived into the house, the evidence is too strong against me. Those bills—those dreadful bills—and then Lady Lechmere's unfortunate note—O Gertrude, I am undone—I am undone! Ruin is inevitable—destruction is certain!"

"Yes—if you meet your misfortunes half-way, or sink down under them at once," exclaimed Gertrude. "But, happen what will, your ladyship must not stay here another minute: for if the Earl *did* come and find you in such a place—pardon me the observation—there would *then* be no hope nor chance of either explaining away existing circumstances, or of eventual reconciliation."

"Then what would you advise?" asked the Countess, with all the fluttering of painful excitement. "Whither shall I go?—what asylum shall I seek?"

"Come home, my lady—and dare it all!" rejoined Gertrude: "that is the best plan! Who knows what the chapter of accidents may turn up in your favour? But of course, if you once absent yourself from your home and the household knows it, *then* do you convict yourself beyond all redemption."

"But how, in the name of heaven, are we to enter?" demanded the Countess. "Surely not by the same way that you ere now quitted the mansion?" she said, with an hysterical laugh.

"Your ladyship forgets," said the abigail, "that if nothing had happened you would have returned home between five and six in the morning, as on former occasions."

"Yes—dressed in your apparel, my dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, suddenly recollecting these matters which had been lost sight of in the poignancy of her alarm: "and I have the key of the area-door with me——Oh! all this had slipped my memory!"

"Hasten, my lady—and let us depart," said Gertrude. "Come—time presses——"

"One minute, and I will return!" exclaimed the Countess: and she quitted the room where this colloquy took place.

What she said to Emmerson on returning to him, or what they arranged between themselves during the few minutes that they hurriedly conversed while the Countess finished dressing herself, matters not now. Suffice it to say that the infatuated bill-broker wrote her ladyship a check upon his banker for a couple of thousand pounds, and that she soon afterwards quitted Mrs. Gale's establishment in company with Gertrude.

Back to Grosvenor Street did the lady and the

lady's-maid proceed together. The boudoir-window was still open; and not a light was visible in any part of the house. That Gertrude's flight had remained undiscovered was therefore evident; and that the Earl had retired to rest was presumable, if not certain.

Editha and her maid descended the area-steps and entered the house by means of a duplicate key of the servants' door which her ladyship had in her possession. During the walk home from Soho Square, they had determined what course to pursue. Most of the locks of the upper chambers were of pretty well the same pattern; and Gertrude had assured her mistress that several of the bedroom-keys fitted each other's doors, and that it was more than probable one of them would suit that of the boudoir. If this should prove to be the case, it was decided that the Countess should take possession of the boudoir, so that the Earl might be completely astounded when he went thither with the idea of liberating Gertrude in the morning,—it being also hoped by the two artful women that this mystification would render him more pliant and accessible to any artifices that might be adopted to explain away the present suspicions. But on the other hand, if no key could be found to open the boudoir, then it was resolved that the Countess should pass the night in another chamber, and that all the rest should be left entirely to the chapter of accidents.

Such were the plans deliberated upon and settled during the hurried twenty minutes' walk from Soho Square to Grosvenor Street; and now that Editha and her faithful abigail were once more within the walls of Curzon House, the heart of each beat with acute suspense. They had to grope their way in the dark, not daring to run the risk of being observed wandering about the house with a candle. Like spirits did they steal from the lower regions up into the hall; and as noiselessly and carefully did they thence ascend the principal staircase to the storeys above. There they speedily possessed themselves of half-a-dozen keys, which the expert lady's-maid, whose presence of mind exceeded that of her mistress, tried in the lock of the boudoir-door. Nor was she disappointed in the calculation she had made, inasmuch as one of them turned easily in the lock.

Editha and Gertrude entered, locking the door behind them, although the latter did not purpose to remain long in the boudoir. To shut down the window and put the furniture back into its place, were now the next steps adopted by Editha and her maid; and notwithstanding they were in the dark, they nevertheless made these adjustments as noiselessly as possible. Gertrude then assisted Editha to undress herself; and having done this, she prepared to leave her ladyship for the rest of the night—or rather for the next few hours of the morning.

"Pray sustain your spirits, my lady," said the faithful girl, "and there is no telling what may happen for the best. But mind when your ladyship locks the door after me that you take out the key, so that when his lordship comes in the morning there may be no impediment to his unlocking the door. Then what will be his surprise at finding your ladyship here instead of me!"

Editha was about to make some reply, when a noise, as of some one moving about the house, reached their ears. They remained dead silent, holding their very breath to listen. The sounds of footsteps stealthily creaking, approached the door of that boudoir: and now Gertrude, with admirable presence of mind, drew forth the key from the lock.

"Why did you do that?" asked Editha, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Oh! my dear lady," responded Gertrude, in a tone of concentrated joy, though likewise speaking in a whisper,—"because I suddenly behold a means of accomplishing your salvation! Hush—húsh!"

And in a few moments, as the steps outside stopped at the door, the lady and the maid both heard a key cautiously introduced into the lock. Thereupon, the Countess of Curzon, suddenly divined the truth—that same truth which had already struck Gertrude, and the important results of which the astute girl had immediately foreseen. Yes—it was now apparent enough to Editha also: her husband, the Earl, was no doubt coming to share the couch of the lady's-maid!

A few more whispered words passed rapidly between Editha and Gertrude—but so low that they were only just audible to themselves, and could not have been heard by anybody even at a couple of yards' distance.

That the Earl was approaching without a light was certain, because not a ray gleamed through the key-hole, nor shone under the door. And now this door was slowly opened; and Gertrude, assuming the frightened tone of one suddenly starting from her sleep, exclaimed, "Who is there?"

"'Tis I, dearest Gertrude!" answered the Earl, in a tone that was tremulous with desire: and he closed the door behind him.

"But, my lord—I thought that you had conceived a hatred for me ere now?" exclaimed the abigail, in a deprecatory tone.

"Ah! but I was enraged, dear girl—cruelly enraged," replied Curzon, now pausing to lock the door. "But on retiring to rest I could not sleep—and gradually your image rose up in my mind, until at last it has so far got the better of all other thoughts and impressions, that I have resolved to enjoy a few hours of love and bliss in your arms, and leave until to-morrow the vexations, the scandals, and the exposures that may belong thereto. So let me embrace thee, dearest Gertrude—let me embrace thee!" cried the Earl, his voice now swelling with the tremulous exultation of desire mingled with anticipated triumph.

And through the utter darkness of that boudoir did he feel his way towards the couch, into which Editha—his own wife Editha—had stealthily crept, while Gertrude had glided away, after answering him, into the farthest corner of the room.

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"Wherefore will you not speak to me, dearest girl?" asked the Earl of Curzon, in a voice stifling with desire. "Ah! you murmur something with those sweet lips of your's——but I cannot catch your words——no matter——I kiss your lips, and you kiss back again! The faithless Editha——this is almost punishment enough for her perfidy, if she did but know it! But she can not know it—she will never know it! And you will turn against her, dear girl—will you not? Ah! wherefore that impatient ejaculation? Well, I will speak to you no more upon that topic—at least

for the present. To-morrow—or another time—— Ah! my darling Gertrude, I love you—yes I love you: and I will forgive your taciturnity—your silence—if you will continue to lavish those tender kisses upon me!"

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About an hour afterwards, when all was still and quiet in the boudoir, some one cautiously unlocked the door and stole forth, closing the door as noiselessly again behind her, but now leaving it unlocked.

The person who thus stole forth, was Gertrude: and ascending to her own chamber on the storey above, she procured a light. With the candle in her hand, she once more descended: and this time she stole guardedly and with spirit-like tread to the Earl of Curzon's own apartment—that apartment which he had ere now left to seek the boudoir. In this apartment Gertrude forthwith instituted a minute search; and after some delay, she found what she sought concealed amongst the linen in one of the Earl's drawers. Joyous as if she had discovered a treasure, and triumphant as if she had just achieved some important victory, the damsel stole up again to her own chamber; and before she retired to rest, she set fire to a quantity of papers and threw them into the grate, gaily and cheerfully watching them till they consumed to tinder. She then extinguished the light, and laid down to repose.

But in about three hours Gertrude awoke; and it being now daylight, she got up. Having arranged her beautiful hair, so dishevelled and disordered by the prominent adventure of the preceding night, and having refreshed herself with ablutions in the chill water, she put on the plain but neat and becoming apparel of her station. When she had thus concluded her toilette, she went down-stairs to the servants' hall, to wait till her mistress's bell should ring.

The light of the new-born day had already rendered everything plainly visible within the boudoir, when the Earl of Curzon awoke from a slumber where the image of Gertrude had seemed to be strangely mingling with scenes in which his faithless wife and Colonel Malpas also figured. He rubbed his eyes—threw a hasty glance around the room—and on recognising where he was, all the incidents of the past night came trooping in with rapid march upon his memory. Turning towards his companion, a sudden ejaculation of astonishment and dismay burst from his lips, when he encountered the arch and mischievous looks—*not* of the lovely Gertrude, as he had expected—but of his own wife, the Countess Editha!

"Heavens! what means that exclamation, Charles?" said her ladyship, affecting to be concerned and even terrified at the suddenness of her husband's cry.

"Is it a dream? can it be a dream?" muttered Curzon, pressing his hand to his brow and endeavouring to concentrate all his thoughts in one focus.

"Have you been labouring under some unpleasant dream?" asked Editha, now assuming a look of tender anxiety, while at the same time, unperceived by her husband, she pulled the bell-rope that hung behind the curtains of the bed.

"I cannot understand it—it is unaccountable!" said Curzon: then turning his eyes suddenly upon Editha, he demanded abruptly, "How came you here?"

"How came I here!" she echoed, with a tone and look of amazement. "Is it not my own room—the boudoir where I sleep when we do not pass the night together?—and therefore should I not rather ask how came *you* here?"

"Perdition! what means it all?" exclaimed the Earl: "am I mad? or have I really been dreaming?"

At this moment the door opened; and Gertrude made her appearance in answer to the summons of the boudoir-bell. Her looks were as composed, tranquil, and sedate as if nothing extraordinary had occurred during the past night; and when the Earl thus marked her unruffled mien and saw that there was nothing sly, arch, or mischievous therein, he became more bewildered than ever. Again he pressed his hand upon his brow to steady his thoughts; and Gertrude availed herself of that opportunity to dart a sudden look of intelligence at Editha. Then did her ladyship's countenance become lighted up with an expression of joy and triumph: for she understood full well the meaning of her devoted abigail's glance—and she knew that she was saved!

"Did your ladyship ring?" asked Gertrude, in a tone as tranquil and respectful as usual.

"No," answered Editha: "you can retire."

The abigail accordingly withdrew; but scarcely had the door closed behind her, when the Earl of Curzon, starting up in the couch, exclaimed, "Ah! your ladyship has manœuvred well! You were doubtless anxious that a witness should thus behold us together, so that there may be what the lawyers call a *condonation* on my part in respect to your by-gone infidelities?"

"My lord, this to me!" exclaimed Editha, her eyes flashing fire, but rather with the triumph that blazed up in her bosom than with the anger which she assumed.

"Yes," continued the Earl of Curzon, springing from the couch and hastily huddling on the slippers, trousers, and dressing-gown in which he had sought that boudoir during the night: "you think, madam, that I am either to be deceived by mystification or over-reached by stratagem? That things have occurred which I cannot understand, I do not deny: but you will lean upon a fragile support if you fancy that because I have been seen in your bed *after* the discovery of your infidelities, I have deprived myself of legal remedy. Ah! fool that I was ever to have fancied that you, issuing from such a precious stock, would do honour to the name of Curzon! But thank God! I possess the proofs of your infidelities and crimes: and you will perhaps understand me," he added with a sardonic malignity, "when I declare that to the guilt of adultery have you superadded the black turpitude of forgery!"

"My lord!" exclaimed Editha, the richest crimson glowing beneath the soft duskiness of her skin, and mantling thus warmly not only upon the brow and the cheeks, but also the neck, the bare shoulders, and the naked bosom of the patrician lady: "you are a coward thus to insult a defenceless woman! If I had a dagger or a pistol at hand, I would lay you dead at my feet."

"Editha!" exclaimed the Earl, bending upon

her a look in which wonder and scorn, uncertainty and hate, were strangely commingled: "can it be possible that you are unaware of what took place last night?—has there really been no communion between you and Gertrude?—did I not lock her in this room?—and whether you were here concealed at the time, or whether by some means you penetrated hither afterwards, in any case must you be aware that your writing-desk furnished me with the proofs of your criminality."

"That you are base enough to ransack my desk, my lord, is probable," cried Editha, the excitement of the scene and the consciousness of her safety inspiring her with all the presence of mind requisite to enact the part of outraged innocence: "but that you discovered in that desk aught whereof I need be ashamed, I positively deny."

"By heavens! this is too much," exclaimed Curzon, his naturally handsome countenance becoming destorted with rage. "The proofs, madam, are in my possession; the note of your accomplice Lady Lechmere—the forgeries ——"

"Coward—liar!" exclaimed Editha, springing like a tigress from the couch. "If there be forgeries in the case, 'tis *you* who have forged them! Ah! doubtless the trammels of matrimony are inconvenient to a man who wishes to pursue his own numerous intrigues; and therefore you seek to get rid of your wife. But no, my lord—I defy you—I defy you!"

The Earl of Curzon now gazed with unmixed astonishment upon Editha. Indeed, for a few moments he was utterly confounded. The tone of confidence in which she spoke, the genuine indignation which appeared to inspire her, the undismayed assurance with which she met his looks, and indeed almost beat them down with her own proud and haughty ones—all this struck the nobleman speechless and motionless. And, heavens! how grandly, how sublimely beautiful seemed the Countess of Curzon at that moment—no longer soft, languishing, and amorous like a dusky houri of Mohammed's paradise, but bursting forth into the personification of Bellona the Goddess of War, so that her very beauty became terrible to gaze upon, and the eyes that were wont to burn with the fires of love, now shot forth blasting lightnings. With the scant night-dress alone draping her form—her luxuriant purply sable hair flowing in heavy masses over her shoulders and down her back—her heaving bust all exposed in its glowing firmness—one arm gracefully curved, the other extended so as with imperious gesture to enhance the force of her language—her nude feet and ankles exposed in their sculptural symmetry to the middle of the legs' robust swell—her whole figure, in fine, seemed to realise all that artist ever fancied, poet ever dreamed, or sculptor ever designed in the form of peerless beauty vindicating its outraged innocence!

But, Ah! all the glory, the magic, and the sublimity of that scene sink into degradation, shame, and infamy, when it is remembered that Editha was *really* guilty, and that the part which she now enacted was one of consummate duplicity and exquisite hypocrisy. For a few moments, we say did the Earl of Curzon remain utterly confounded—annihilated as it were—by the demeanour, the conduct, and the language of his wife. It was either the most stupendous effrontery that woman ever yet had exhibited—or else, if she were innocent, was she the victim of the most extraordinary combination of circumstances ever known. But not long did the Earl of Curzon hesitate between these alternatives. Too much a man of the world to yield a ready credulity to any appearances of innocence, and too deeply conscious of error himself not to be ever ready to believe the errors of others, he soon burst forth into a laugh of bitter scorn, exclaiming, "Ah! I see how it is, madam: you fancy that in your prudence you have destroyed all evidences of your guilt! But your memory fails you—for whatever your intentions might have been, you certainly have not altogether carried them out. I tell you that I possess *proofs*——"

"Then produce them, my lord," said Editha, in a tone of defiance.

"I will, I will:" and he turned towards the door.

"And if you do not," she said, springing forward and detaining him by the arm for a moment,—"as a nobleman—a gentleman—a man—shall I also say as a *husband*—it will be your duty——"

"Yes, to fall upon my knees and demand pardon for this outrage—these suspicions!" ejaculated Curzon, throwing upon his wife a look of dark malignity, as much as to imply that it was perfect madness to suppose there was any chance of his being compelled to humble himself thus.

"Be it so," she observed, in a tone of confidence, as she released his arm from the firm grasp which her delicate fingers had fixed upon it.

The Earl hastened from the boudoir and sped to his own apartment, murmuring to himself, "Now for the proofs that shall overwhelm her with confusion!"

He opened the drawer—he tossed aside his linen: but the object of his search was not there! A chill struck to his heart, as the idea of some deep but inexplicable treachery flashed to his mind. Furious with rage, but trembling all over as nervously as if stricken with a palsy, he tore out the drawer from its place and emptied all its contents on the carpet. But the packet which he sought—that packet which contained Lady Lechmere's note and the forged bills—had disappeared.

No wonder indeed: for it was this same packet which Gertrude had found, and the contents of which she had burnt in her own chamber. Yes—and this was the meaning of that significant look which she had flung upon her mistress when entering the boudoir—that look which told Editha she was saved!

Pale, trembling, and overwhelmed, the Earl of Curzon sank into an arm-chair and gave way to his painful reflections. To believe that all the incidents of the past night belonged only to a dream, was ridiculous: but that he had been singularly, mysteriously, and effectually outwitted, was evident. He had not a proof—not a single proof—of his wife's guilt: and yet he knew her to be guilty. He had only just come from sharing her couch; and therefore to dream of law-proceedings was preposterous. To create an exposure and a scandal by repudiating his wife on bare suspicion, and without being enabled to follow up such an act by the usual legal process, would be only to render himself contemptible as a jealous husband.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through the Earl's mind; and perceiving that he

was in every way outwitted and deprived of remedy, he suddenly made up his mind to put as good a face as possible upon the matter—that is to say, *for the present!* He accordingly returned to the boudoir, where he found Editha combing out her long shining hair. As he entered the room she turned towards him; and with a look full of calm confidence—for all her recent excitement appeared to have cooled down—she said, "Well, my lord, what aspect does the matter now wear?"

"Editha," he responded, assuming a jocular air, "I must confess that I am completely out-manœuvred. I don't know how—but I think it is tolerably clear that your maid Gertrude is a young woman of no ordinary ability and tact—for which qualities you doubtless value her so much."

"But is it also for the same reason that your lordship seeks to deprive me of her by making her your mistress:"—and as Editha gave this bitter retort, her beautiful lips curled with relentless irony.

"Well, I think that the less said upon all these things for the present, the better," returned the Earl of Curzon, affecting to laugh: and with these words he was about to quit the room, when Editha caught him by the arm. "What! is there anything more to say?" he demanded.

"Yes," she replied, with firmness of voice and decision of look: "as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a husband, you have to apologise for having dared to accuse me without proof."

"Oh! yes—I remember that I pledged myself to some such apology as this: and therefore," he continued, with an air of mock gravity, "I beg to tender my earnest excuses to your ladyship for having ventured to suspect your purity and fidelity; and I may add that I am now entirely convinced that you are as immaculate as a wife can b——'

"Enough!" exclaimed Editha, colouring with indignation, as her husband's tone grew more and more bantering. "You have made the apology—and that is sufficient."

The Earl affected to laugh gaily, and quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

MORE MYSTIFICATION.

We may now explain to the reader the precise manner in which the Countess of Curzon had been accustomed to manage her intrigues through the agency of Lady Lechmere.

As was particularly the case in those times, with married couples in high life who did not live upon the very best terms together, the Earl and Countess of Curzon frequently occupied separate bed-chambers—the Earl having an apartment which was called his own private one, and the Countess having her boudoir. It was therefore comparatively an easy thing for her ladyship occasionally to stay out all night if she chose—the only precaution needful being to prevent the servants (Gertrude excepted) from discovering the fact. Hence the contrivance into which the reader has already obtained something more than an insight. Thus, for instance, the Countess went in full dress and in her own carriage to Lady Lechmere's house: a few hours later Gertrude met her there;—their apparel was speedily changed—and while Gertrude, playing the part of Countess, was driven back in the carriage, the Countess herself repaired whithersoever she chose. Then, at daybreak, apparelled as Gertrude, the Countess would return to the mansion in safety. If seen thus coming home by any of the servants, the supposition was that the young lady's-maid—for whom of course Editha would be taken—had passed the night at her parents' house: and on the occasions when these stratagems were to be carried into effect, Gertrude was wont to take the precaution in the evening of casually mentioning in the servants' hall, that she had received permission from her mistress to remain with her mother till the following morning.

But there was another phase which the stratagem assumed, involving a certain alteration of its details, according to circumstances. Thus, for instance, if Editha required an excuse to be absent from home for only a few hours during the evening, she would pretend to have received an invitation from Lady Lechmere to a party: but Gertrude, muffled in Editha's ermine cloak, and perhaps wearing her veil, would proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, where instead of any evening party at all, the servants would receive positive orders from their mistress to admit *only the Countess of Curzon*. Thus Gertrude, disguised as the Countess, would be shown up into Lady Lechmere's boudoir, and there remain for two or three hours, as the case might be, until the carriage came to fetch her home again. Thus, all the while, the coachman and lacquey attached to Lady Curzon's carriage would naturally suppose that it was their mistress whom they had driven to Lady Lechmere's at eight or nine and fetched home again at twelve or one: while, on the other hand, Lady Lechmere's domestics were equally remote from suspecting that it was any other than the Countess of Curzon who thus came and passed several hours *tete-à-tete* with their mistress.

The reader will now understand the meaning of that note, bearing the signature of Lady Lechmere, which the Earl of Curzon had found in his wife's writing-desk. But wherefore were all those strangely ramified precautions necessary? Because Editha was too prudent to have incurred the risk of allowing either Malpas or Emmerson to pass the night with her in her own boudoir at home: and therefore it was necessary to devise measures to enable her to meet her *paramour for the time being* at Mrs. Gale's house of accommodation in Soho Square. But of course she could not drive thither openly and fearlessly in her carriage; and when going out of an evening, she could not possibly devise any excuse to dispense with the carriage: she could not say she was going anywhere on foot or that she preferred a hackney-coach. She must therefore *seem* to use the carriage, even if she did not in reality: hence the astute arrangement of allowing Gertrude to take her place and perform her part, while she herself, modestly disguised in Gertrude's unobtrusive apparel, enjoyed unlimited freedom combined with a rare security.

Having given these few explanations, we now resume the thread of our narrative. As a matter of course, the Earl of Curzon was not satisfied at the result of the adventures which have occupied the two or three preceding chapters. As we have

already stated, he saw that he had been outwitted: but *how*, he could not altogether conjecture. That Gertrude had purloined the documents from his own apartment, he failed not to guess: but the great mystery to him was how his own wife Editha had been his partner of the couch in the boudoir instead of Gertrude. He had assuredly locked the young abigail in that boudoir; and it was her voice which he had subsequently recognised beyond all possibility of doubt, when he returned to that room later in the night. But while revolving all these things in his mind, he recollected that on seeking the couch in the boudoir, when fancying he was about to be clasped in the arms of Gertrude, he had locked the door: and he likewise recollected that in the morning the door was *unlocked*, when Gertrude entered to ask if her mistress had rung. The door, therefore, had been unlocked by somebody: and if so, the presence of Editha in the couch with him might be easily accounted for by supposing that while he slept Gertrude had risen and changed places with the Countess. Then, if this were the case, and if this supposition were the correct one, had the beautiful Gertrude been for any time his companion in that bed? At first he was inclined to believe so: but then he reflected that from the very instant he entered that couch and was clasped in the arms of the female occupying it, this female observed a profound silence—nor could he by coaxing or entreaty succeed in eliciting from her a single word. This circumstance proved, then, that it must have been Editha who was occupying that couch when he entered the room,—Editha who received him in her arms,—Editha whom he had so fondly and passionately embraced, while all the time fancying that he was enjoying the transports of love in the arms of Gertrude! It was therefore quite clear, from this chain of reasoning, that Editha must have been in the room *with* Gertrude when he went thither in the dark, and that while Editha prepared to receive him in her arms, Gertrude's voice deluded him into the belief that it was she herself who was the sole occupant of that couch which he sought.

Having come to these conclusions, the Earl of Curzon felt less satisfied and more piqued than ever. Not only had he been outwitted by his wife in every way; but he was also duped by her abigail. That he was so duped, Editha well knew: and thus the two together—mistress and maid—had not only utterly baffled all his endeavours to establish the proofs of the former's infidelity, but were enabled to have a good laugh together at his expense. Nothing, in fact, could be more ridiculous than the position which he felt he occupied in the eyes not only of Editha, but also of Gertrude: and he was determined to be revenged on them both. Of course, as the master of the house, he could at once have discharged the young lady's-maid: but as there was no ostensible cause to allege for taking such a decisive proceeding upon himself, it would appear most arbitrary and unjust—besides its being a most unusual thing for the husband to interfere with the wife's special dependants. Moreover, the mere discharge of Gertrude would in itself be an act for which she would care so little, as to be totally incommensurate with the amount of revenge he sought. She had humbled his pride—she had aided her mistress to baffle and outwit him: and though not naturally of a cowardly character or unmanly disposition, the Earl resolved upon some signal and cruel revenge.

The reader will perhaps wonder why he did not call upon Lady Lechmere to see what he could discover relative to his wife's proceedings. But he was too much a man of the world not to know full well that to whatsoever extent Lady Lechmere connived at or assisted Editha's intrigues, she would be prepared to defend and protect them by giving an indignant denial to any accusation on the subject. Besides which, the Earl had no idea of proclaiming to the world the ignominious fact that he knew himself to be a cuckold, but could not prove it, and was therefore compelled to endure his wife's infidelities.

There was however one person whom he resolved to see: and this was Emmerson. But not for a moment did it strike the Earl that the bill-broker had become his wife's paramour. Whether they were even acquainted or not, he did not exactly know: but that Emmerson had *privately* sent her back the bills which she had forged in favour of Colonel Malpas, was evident enough. How had this occurrence been brought about?—was Emmerson aware of Editha's guilt?—and if so, to what extent? These were the particulars which the Earl of Curzon was desirous to ascertain: and therefore, after a hurried breakfast, did he mount his horse, and attended by his groom, repair to the money-making regions of the City.

Mr. Emmerson was seated alone in his private office in Nicholas Lane, pondering somewhat gloomily on the occurrences of the preceding night, and wondering what on earth had been the issue of the adventure. From Editha's lips he had hurriedly heard how her husband had returned and had found the packet of forged bills in her desk—and in a few hastily-exchanged sentences they had agreed upon the outline of some tale, to be told by himself, should the Earl call on him to demand any explanation of the circumstance of his name being on the back of those forged bills. But whether this story, so hurriedly and imperfectly concocted, would serve any purpose at all, even if the Earl should call on him,—or whether the discoveries made by his lordship were of too serious and comprehensive a nature to be explained away by sophistry or accounted for by artifice,—these were the uncertainties between which Mr. Emmerson was painfully hovering at the moment when the office-boy entered to announce the Earl of Curzon!

Emmerson could not help trembling from head to foot through fear of detection, exposure, and chastisement. But not suffering his emotions to be perceived, he bade the boy at once introduce his lordship. Then, as the Earl made his appearance extending his hand with a sort of affable condescension and aristocratic patronage towards him, he felt persuaded that whatever might have been the issue of the previous night's adventure, he himself remained unsuspected.

"Pray sit down, my lord," said Emmerson, bustling about to hand the nobleman a chair. "Will your lordship take a glass of wine and a biscuit? It is just twelve o'clock—and though perhaps not lunch-time in the fashionable regions whence your lordship has just come——"

"Thank you, Emmerson," said the Earl, carelessly. "I have not long breakfasted. But what news in the City?"

"Why, would your lordship believe it—that conceited little humbug Mr. Under-sheriff Fire has actually got made an Alderman; and Tibbs, who has so long managed the revenues of the ward of Guzzleton, has been obliged to resign at last. But what is the business that has procured me the honour of a call from your lordship this forenoon?"

"You remember, Emmerson," said the Earl, "that when I called upon you two or three months ago about some little money matters, you seemed to think that I had a great many promissory notes and bills of exchange in the hands of different persons: and if I recollect right, I told you at the time that General Beechy, young George Sefton, Paul Dysart, and Colonel Malpas, amongst others, had all asked me to become security for them?"

"I recollect perfectly well the conversation to which your lordship alludes," said Emmerson, who and by this time recovered all his wonted business-like composure, although he perceived plainly enough into what channel the discourse was about to be turned: but he was ready prepared with the tale agreed upon between himself and Editha.

"Now, it struck me at the time," continued the Earl, "that you were rather incredulous when I assured you that I had refused to have anything to do with all those persons."

"I certainly had reason, as I thought," said Emmerson coolly, "to doubt your lordship's word at the time of which we are speaking: inasmuch as at that very moment when you assured me that you had given no acceptances at all, I had in my cash-box several bills bearing your lordship's name, to the tune of five thousand guineas."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl, with a sort of subdued chuckle: for he now fancied that he was once more in the right track to bring all her guilt home to the faithless Editha. "I suppose then, Emmerson, you discovered those bills to be forgeries?" he added inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord, they were forgeries indeed," returned Emmerson; "and it was that scoundrel Malpas who forged them. But I thought that by this time you would have learnt——"

"Malpas forged them!" interrupted the Earl, looking very hard at the bill-broker. "Surely you must mistake? That he placed them in your hands, is one thing: but that he himself perpetrated the forgeries, is another."

"In this very office, my lord," said Emmerson, with increasing effrontery, "did Colonel Malpas, when taxed by me with the forgery, confess his guilt and implore my mercy. Of course I did not wish to send him to the scaffold; and therefore I allowed him to compromise the affair by making a simple debt of it: and for that debt he is now a prisoner in the King's Bench."

"And you therefore gave him up the bills?" said the Earl of Curzon inquiringly.

"How is this, my lord?" ejaculated Emmerson with well-assumed astonishment. "Is it possible that your lordship never received those bills—— But of course you have: otherwise how could you have obtained any knowledge of the matter at all?"

"Now, pray explain yourself, Emmerson," said the Earl, beginning to feel strangely bewildered once more, as if the mystifications of the previous night were to be perpetuated during the day and to follow him from the West End even into the heart of the City.

"The history of the bills is plain and simple enough," returned Emmerson. "I had already endorsed those bills in order to pay them into my banker's hands, when I discovered that they were forgeries. Although willing to avoid instituting a criminal process against Colonel Malpas, and to hush up the matter, I nevertheless thought, on mature reflection, that *you* ought to be informed of it. I accordingly proceeded to Grosvenor Street to see your lordship on the subject. You were not however within: but her ladyship the Countess was at home and disengaged. Time being valuable to me, and not choosing to run the chance of calling three or four times without seeing your lordship, I took the liberty of requesting an interview with her ladyship, to whom I explained all that had occurred. Her ladyship was frightened lest the matter should breed some desperate quarrel between Malpas and your lordship, and end in a duel: she therefore suggested that it would be better to allow some little time to elapse, during which she undertook to seize some favourable opportunity to mention the whole transaction guardedly to your lordship. Well satisfied with this proposition, and acknowledging its prudence, I at once declared my readiness to leave the whole matter in the hands of her ladyship. I had not the bills with me at the time: but immediately on my return to Nicholas Lane, I enclosed them to her ladyship in an envelope marked '*Private*.' And now, my lord, you have the whole history of the transaction."

"Yes," stammered Curzon, scarcely able to conceal his astonishment at this unexpected explanation: "and I must admit that you acted very handsomely in the business."

"I presume that if the Countess of Curzon has not already mentioned the affair to your lordship, it has been for want of a suitable opportunity or else through oversight."

"I suppose it must be so," remarked Curzon, not knowing what to say and scarcely what to think: but still he was as far as ever from entertaining the remotest suspicion that Emmerson had become his wife's paramour.

Taking his leave, he issued forth from the money-lender's office and was about to remount his horse, when he was suddenly accosted by a well-dressed and good-looking young man whose countenance appeared to be familiar to him.

"My lord," said this individual, "will you excuse me for venturing to give your lordship a piece of advice?—but I conjure you to be careful in your dealings with that hypocritical miscreant Emmerson——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "the advice is startling, but perhaps well meant. Who are you? I have seen your face before."

"Your lordship has seen me in that very office," was the response: and the young man glanced over his shoulder towards the door of Emmerson's place of business.

"Yes—I recollect you now," exclaimed the Earl: "your name is Varian."

"And if the world has heard of my crimes, it knows little of my misfortunes," said the young man, bitterly. "If I were a culprit who deserved

PORTRAIT OF MISS BATHURST.

transportation, then that villain Emmerson is a man for whom even hanging is too good!"

"We cannot converse here, at Emmerson's very door," said the Earl: "and it is absolutely necessary that I should hear all you may have to unfold concerning your late master. Will you accompany me into some adjacent tavern?"

"No, my lord — not now," answered Varian. "Having received a full pardon, I avail myself of the first leisure moment to come hither and seek an interview with the villain Emmerson in order to tax him with all his infamy and overwhelm him with reproaches. This is the beginning of the deadly revenge which I have sworn to wreak upon that man — a vengeance which will be accomplished by unmasking him to all with whom he has any dealings. Hence the liberty I have taken in accosting your lordship now——"

"Then will you call upon me at my own house, Mr. Varian?" asked the Earl.

"I will, my lord:" — and with these words Theodore turned abruptly away and entered the bill-broker's office.

The Earl of Curzon then mounted his horse, which his groom had been holding at a little distance; and riding back to the West End, he proceeded to Carlton House for the purpose of calling upon Lady Sackville.

CHAPTER XCIX.

ROYALTY'S FAVOURITE.

Venetia, elegantly dressed in a morning *negligée*, was seated upon the sofa with the Prince Regent, in her magnificent saloon at Carlton House.

His Royal Highness was gazing with the mingled ardour and languor of a passion which had been crowned with success, but which was never-

was therefore ignorant of the circumstance of Ariadne's restoration to life, which indeed had only taken place a couple of days previous to the one whereof we are now writing: and we should observe that the interest and the gold of the Marquis of Leveson had succeeded in keeping the circumstance out of the newspapers of the day.

"You must have thought that something fatal had happened to me," observed the Baronet, as he entered the boudoir: "that is to say, if you condescended to devote a moment's thought to me at all?"

"My dear Douglas," said Venetia, motioning him to take a seat upon the sofa by her side, "you are aware that whatever my failings may be, a ridiculous affectation, is not one of them: and therefore I will candidly confess that I *have* been both surprised and grieved to think that you have allowed nine or ten days to pass without coming near me."

"Ah! do not chide me, dear Venetia," said the Baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. "You are aware that I have had much to annoy me—much to occupy my attention——"

"Your mansion was burnt down," observed Venetia; "and that was certainly enough to cause you much vexation. But you are rich—and the loss can soon be repaired. Wherefore, then, seem so dull—so melancholy—so pensive? It is not natural ——Ah! I understand you now," she abruptly exclaimed, withdrawing her hand as suddenly: "the death of that poor girl whom you picked up at Shooter's Hill, has affected you more than you choose to admit."

"You will be surprised, Venetia," said the Baronet, "to learn that the poor girl, of whom you speak, is not dead after all."

"What mean you?" cried Venetia, gazing upon the Baronet with unfeigned wonder. "Did you not tell me that she was no more—that she had died through the brutality of the Marquis of Leveson——"

"'Tis an amazing and extraordinary history altogether," interrupted the Baronet. "In a word, Ariadne Varian was plunged into a profound trance, from which she was miraculously awakened the day before yesterday."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon then proceeded to recite those particulars connected with the damsel's resuscitation, which are already known to the reader, and which were fraught with so wild, so romantic, and yet so deep an interest.

"And where is Miss Varian now?" asked Venetia, profoundly amazed at all that she had just heard.

"She was last evening removed," answered the Baronet, "under the care of my housekeeper Mrs. Baines, to apartments which have been taken for the purpose in a secluded and quiet neighbourhood. It was at first thought requisite to allow her to remain for a few days at Leveson House: but the indignity she had endured beneath that roof and the horrors to which that outrage had led, produced such an effect upon her mind that the physicians were compelled to consent to her removal thus speedily. Her brother is with her in her new abode ——"

"And doubtless Sir Douglas Huntingdon will be a constant visitor there?" interrupted Venetia, with a slight movement indicative of annoyance, and with a look that was the least thing piqued and pouting.

"Ah! 'tis cruel thus to suspect the fidelity of a heart devoted to your charms!" exclaimed the Baronet, sinking upon his knees at Venetia's feet. "But I will confess that this strange episode of which Ariadne Varian is the heroine, has produced a singular — and indeed unpleasant effect upon my mind: it has unsettled me—it has thrown a damp as it were upon my spirits—it has rendered me restless and uneasy ——"

"My dear Douglas," observed Venetia, the colour mounting to her cheeks, as she bent her beauteous head towards the Baronet, who knelt at her feet,— "you are in love with that girl—and you are now, with wonderful ingenuousness, confessing to me all the minute symptoms of your passion!"

"No, Venetia — no!" exclaimed Sir Douglas starting from his knees and resuming his place by her side upon the sofa. "Even if I may have fancied so for a moment, it was but a dream. Indeed, I experienced a boundless compassion—an illimitable sympathy—for that poor girl, who saved my life at the murderers' hut, and whom circumstances thus so singularly placed in my care."

"I tell you, Douglas," interrupted Venetia, gently repulsing his hand as he attempted to take her's,—"I tell you that you love Ariadne Varian! And why should you not? If she be beautiful, and amiable, and good, she is doubtless worthy of your affection——"

"What? the sister of a poor clerk!" ejaculated the Baronet: "and he a man whom the law has branded and whom society will ever regard as an outcast—although the royal prerogative, influenced by your goodness, has pardoned him!"

"But are not you the master of your own actions?" inquired Venetia, bending down her eyes: "and may you not, if you choose, marry this girl, obscure and humble though she be? As for her brother's unhappy position—wherefore should she suffer for *his* errors?"

"Oh! it is useless thus to argue the point, Venetia," cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, somewhat impatiently: "for I tell you that I love not Ariadne Varian!"

"And I, who perhaps know the human heart better than you," returned Venetia, "in spite of all your worldly experience—I tell you, I say, that you *do* love her, and in the recesses of your soul there is at this moment a voice which echoes the assertion I have just made! Now, my dear Douglas," she observed, looking suddenly up with a kind and amiable expression of countenance, "the feeling that must henceforth subsist between you and me, is friendship—and nothing more!"

"Ah! cruel Venetia," exclaimed the Baronet: "have you not given me other hopes?—have you not filled my heart with the paradise of blissful expectations?—and now will you render that heart a desert?"

"No — believe me, dear Douglas," rejoined Venetia, with an amiable smile, "your heart will not be a desert—for it will be filled with the image of Ariadne Varian!"

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was about to make some reply, and urge the assurance that the image of Venetia alone occupied his heart, when Jessica again made her appearance in the boudoir.

"The Marquis of Leveson," she said, "requests

an immediate interview with your ladyship. His lordship told the footman that he had some business of importance to communicate to your ladyship, and he is now waiting in the drawing-room."

"Ah! I think that I can guess the nature of Lord Leveson's business," observed Venetia, with a look of indescribable vexation, as she turned towards Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "You, my dear friend, who have so recently become acquainted with all my secrets, and who therefore understand my exact position so well,—you, I say, can see at a glance how it is that circumstances have to some extent placed me in the power of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Yes, dearest Venetia," replied the Baronet: "I understand what you mean. But is he not to some extent in my power?—have I not the means of subjecting both himself and his niece to a terrific exposure? Louisa first—Ariadne next—Oh! the villain—if he dare use menaces to coerce you, Venetia, I will defend you—I will protect you—I will save you from his power!"

"Ten thousand thanks, dear friend, for these assurances," exclaimed Venetia, now of her own accord grasping that hand which she had a few minutes previously repulsed. "But shall I see the Marquis?"

"By all means," rejoined the Baronet: "let us at once ascertain what it is that he requires. After all, it is possible that you may be mistaken as to the object of his visit——"

"No, no," interrupted Venetia, impetuously: "I am convinced that it is with no friendly object he has come hither. Persevering and energetic in accomplishing his aims—insatiable in his sensual longings—no sooner has one intended victim escaped from his toils, when he flies in pursuit of another——"

"Then, all things considered," exclaimed the Baronet, "you would do well to receive the Marquis here: and permit me to remain an unseen witness of the interview, either to be near to protect you from present insult, or to learn those particulars that shall guide my actions for your future rescue."

"Be it as you say," rejoined Venetia: then turning to Jessica, she said, "Let the Marquis be conducted hither."

The lady's-maid, who had been permitted to hear the preceding colloquy because she was well acquainted with all the secrets of her mistress, hastily withdrew; and the moment the door had closed, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ensconced himself behind that self-same screen which on a former occasion had served for his hiding-place. Lady Sackville hastened to compose her features and settle herself as it were with a becoming dignity upon the sofa, in order to receive the Marquis of Leveson: and accordingly, in a few minutes, the nobleman was ushered into the boudoir.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exclaimed, advancing towards Venetia, "to be admitted into the very bower of love and beauty—the mysterious scene of all ineffable fascinations——"

"Was it for the purpose of indulging in this absurd rhapsody, that your lordship sent so pressing a demand for an audience?"—and as Venetia thus spoke, with a quiet sarcasm in her accents and a subdued contemptuousness in her looks, she rose from the sofa as much as to imply that she wished the interview to be already at an end.

"Your ladyship is severe—too severe," observed the Marquis, with a malignant glance, which seemed to infer that the hour of his triumph was drawing near: then with a low bow he asked, "Is it your ladyship's pleasure that I should remain standing?"

"Oh! assuredly not," exclaimed Venetia, with a glance which seemed to fling back the defiance of his lordship's looks. "Pray be seated:" and she herself resumed her place upon the sofa.

The Marquis fixed his eyes steadily upon Lady Sackville; and as with one comprehensive look he embraced all the transcending charms of this woman of matchless beauty, he thought within himself that no daring was too desperate and no measure too extreme for adoption on the part of one who would seek to gain that glorious prize!

"It is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said after a pause, during which Venetia made a very evident gesture of impatience not unmingled with disgust at finding herself thus the object of his lustfully gloating looks: "it is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said, "that I have too many reasons to fear that I am no special favourite with your ladyship—and yet I am one of your ladyship's most enthusiastic admirers."

"Your admiration, my lord, considering all that has taken place," she replied, with a deeply meaning look, "is little flattering to me."

"It is true, my dear Lady Sackville," he continued, totally unabashed, "that when inveigled into one of my mechanical chairs, you well nigh paid the penalty of that curiosity which led you to penetrate into those private apartments——"

"Dare you allude to those chambers of infamy?" ejaculated Venetia, her eyes flashing fire. "But, Ah! my lord, I could have forgiven you for all that you thus attempted towards me: but when I think of how nearly that innocent girl——"

"I understand full well what you mean," interrupted Lord Leveson, with another malignant look: "and it is precisely because I *do* thus understand you, that I have taken it into my head to call upon your ladyship at the present moment. Of course, having been to Stratton Street, I am well aware——"

"We need not repeat things which are mutually known," suddenly interrupted Venetia. "Indeed, I am anxious that this interview should be cut as short as possible. State therefore the business that has brought you hither——"

"The explanation shall be given as curtly—and and I may almost add as imperiously—as it is demanded," replied Lord Leveson.

"Speak, then!" ejaculated Venetia: "and trifle not with my time, which appears to be more precious than your's. What is the nature of your business?"

The Marquis fixed his eyes with the steadiness of a firm resolution upon the glowing countenance of Venetia, who was now truly grand—truly magnificent in her haughty indignation: and in a slow, measured, and determined tone, he said, "My business here is to demand when it will suit Lady Sackville either to admit me to her boudoir as the partner of her couch, or to pass the night with me at Leveson House?"

A torrent of bitter reproaches and terrible invectives rose to the very tip of Venetia's tongue, as these words, so tremendously insulting, met her ear: but with an effort of surpassing energy, she

suddenly stifled those syllables of rage and fury to which her lips were on the point of giving utterance. With the excruciating pang which that preterhuman effort caused her, she became deadly pale—and her bosom, a moment before heaving and falling with rapid palpitations, became instantaneously stilled, as if the proudly swelling globes had suddenly changed into that alabaster which they resembled.

"And are you base enough—are you vile enough, to use the means in your power, in order to enforce a response favourable to your wishes?" she asked, her eyes now burning with a lurid light as they were fixed steadfastly upon him.

"If the sacrifice of my soul were at stake," responded the Marquis, "I would not abandon this proceeding of love and vengeance. Ah!" he cried, with a gloating and yet malignant look, "I hate you as much as I adore you! Your beauty ravishes me—enchants me—drives me mad: and I would surrender all hopes of heaven for one hour of bliss and pleasure in your arms! But on the other hand, think you that I have not a vengeance to wreak for that terrible explosion of wrath, fury, and invective which you poured upon me on the occasion when you plunged me into the prisonage of that chair from which I was drivelling idiot enough to release you? Think you that I have forgotten the storm of reproaches—the tempest of upbraidings—which, though sweeping forth from the lips of an angel of beauty, were withering and blighting as if they came from the tongue of a hideous fiend? Oh! now, haughty beauty that you are—cunning intriguer that I have discovered you to be—I will revel in your charms and make my very love my vengeance!"

Venetia remained calm and immoveable as Lord Leveson thus assailed her with all the lashing, scourging power of the language of menace; but still the lurid light shone in her eyes, and it was evident that her composure was of that terrible kind which is produced by utter desperation. At length, when the Marquis had done speaking, her lips wavered for a moment: but no words came forth—they were stifled as it were in her very throat. But suddenly recollecting what she had for the last few minutes forgotten—namely, that Sir Douglas Huntingdon heard all that passed and had promised to rescue her, she experienced an instantaneous buoyancy of the spirit and a brightening up of the countenance: for the thought now struck her that she might not only be saved from the embraces of that loathsome old man, but also revenged upon him for this and other wrongs.

Again there was a wavering of her lips: and this time the words which she meant to speak came forth.

"To-morrow night," she said, in a low deep tone, "at eleven o'clock punctually, I will call at Leveson House. But, my lord, as my reputation is now to be placed completely in your power, may I hope that it will be held sacred?"

"However great a villain a man may be in his endeavours to obtain possession of a woman," answered the Marquis, "he does not usually trumpet forth his success. And as for the revenge which I cherish against you, it will be fully wreaked when you sink a victim into the arms of my consummated desires. Therefore, as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a man, I swear by everything solemn and sacred, that the secret of your surrender shall be retained in my breast as inviolably and profoundly as if it reposed only with the dead."

Having thus spoken, the Marquis of Leveson made a low bow—turned abruptly away—and quitted the boudoir.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon now emerged from behind the screen. Venetia, pale—marble pale—with concentrated passion—trembling from head to foot—and with her fair hands firmly clenched, had risen from the sofa and was standing before the looking-glass, surveying herself with evident astonishment at the violence of her own emotions as expressed in her countenance.

"It is not worth while to expend so much splendid indignation upon such a wretch," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, taking her hand, which she now willingly abandoned to him. "To-morrow night you shall go to Leveson House: but I will follow you thither. A few minutes after you have entered, will I present myself at the door and demand admission. If it be refused, I will enforce it: and when once confronted with the Marquis, I will threaten him with the fullest exposure of his conduct towards Ariadne, unless he solemnly undertakes to observe eternal peace and silence with regard to you."

"Now you are indeed my best—my dearest friend," said Venetia, gazing tenderly upon the Baronet.

"Ah! would that I could again induce you to believe that I love you—and you alone?" he murmured, pressing her hand to his lips.

"Yes—I shall esteem your conduct of to-morrow night as a proof of love," observed Venetia, her look now assuming an expression of soft wantonness: "and any reward that you may claim——"

"I understand you, dearest," cried the Baronet joyfully: and flinging his arms around her, he pressed his lips to her's in one long delicious kiss.

A minute afterwards the Baronet quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER CI.

THE GLASS-DOOR.

Passing down the long passage into which opened the various apartments allotted to Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon reached the principal landing—when it suddenly struck him that as he had not been at Carlton House for nearly ten days, he ought to pay his respects to the Prince, if only for a few moments. For be it recollected that the Baronet was one of George's boon companions; and his Royal Highness, being excessively touchy and remarkably sensitive on certain points, would have felt annoyed on learning that Sir Douglas had been to the palace and quitted it again without seeing him. The Baronet accordingly asked a page who stood on the principal landing, where his Royal Highness was, and how engaged?

"His Royal Highness, sir," was the reply, "not many minutes since passed this way along the passage, towards the saloon at the end; and I believe that his Royal Highness is at this moment alone there."

"Then I will seek him in that apartment," said the Baronet: and turning upon his heel he proceeded along the passage.

The page offered no farther remark, much less any remonstrance, as he knew that Sir Douglas was not only most intimate with the Prince, but enjoyed, so to speak, the "run of the palace."

At the end of the long passage was the ante-chamber with the glass door at which Sir Douglas and Venetia had first exchanged tender looks, on on that special occasion when the Prince diverted himself with certain young and nobly-born ladies in the magnificent saloon with which that glass-door communicated. Traversing the ante-chamber, the Baronet at once entered the saloon, which, as we have before stated, was furnished in the most luxurious style, and was decorated by numerous chandeliers and lamps.

Closing behind him the glass-door with the crimson blinds, Sir Douglas looked around in expectation of beholding his Royal Highness: but the Prince was not there. Indeed, the Baronet saw no one: and he was about to retreat, when he noticed that a side-door stood open. His acquaintance with Carlton House was so intimate that he knew full well that this door was a secret one communicating with a staircase having a private outlet towards the park: and indeed the Baronet himself had frequently been present at scenes in the magnificent saloon to which that convenient mode of communication had furnished the accessories of frail female beauty.

Seeing, therefore, this little door now standing open, the Baronet immediately felt assured that some pleasant diversion or intrigue was in progress; and for a moment he felt disposed to wait and see whether he should be "one too many" in the expected pastime. But recent events had somewhat steadied his character and sobered his inclinations; and on second thoughts he resolved to retreat from the danger of being lured into some scene of licentiousness or debauch. He accordingly withdrew, closing the glass-door with the crimson blinds. But obedient to some sudden impulse of curiosity, he lingered for a moment to peep back into the saloon just to see whether the Prince was returning. At that same instant the figure of a man emerged from the secret doorway on the opposite side of the saloon; and to his unspeakable amazement, Sir Douglas Huntingdon instantaneously recognised the man whom he had first encountered at the *Jolly Waggoner's*, and whom Nell Gibson had afterwards described to him as being the Public Executioner!

So stupified was Sir Douglas Huntingdon on observing this man in Carlton House, that he was transfixed as it were to the spot,—his looks still plunging through the glass-door into the saloon. Immediately behind the Hangman followed the Prince,—his Royal Highness having lingered for a few moments in the rear to fasten the door at the foot of the staircase, which had a secret spring known only to himself and a few of his most intimate friends, male and female.

Mr. Daniel Coffin was not only attired in his Sunday's best, but had evidently endeavoured to make himself look as smart and as respectable as possible. Nevertheless nothing could materially mitigate the hang-dog expression of his countenance; and the Baronet could perceive that the Prince, though endeavouring to maintain an air of dignified hauteur, was profoundly disgusted at being in the company of such a man.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was determined, if possible, to ascertain what earthly business the Prince Regent of the Kingdom could have to transact with the Public Executioner. The liveliest curiosity had seized upon the Baronet; and at any risk of discovery as an eaves-dropper, was he resolved to gratify it. Seeing by the manner in which the Prince stopped short in the middle of the saloon and leant against a chair, that he intended to hold his interview with the Hangman in that apartment, Sir Douglas kept his post at the glass-door, through which he could obtain a view of all that passed: and by cautiously and gently opening it the least possible distance, he was enabled to overhear the greater portion of the conversation which transpired.

"Now, my man," said the Prince, "be so good as to tell me at once what it is you want with me. I received—with how much astonishment I leave you to guess—the precious specimen of orthography and penmanship which you sent me, begging this interview——"

"Yes—and I received too the private message your Royal Highness sent by a gentleman in plain clothes," observed the Hangman; "and I felt very much obliged at being told that I might come here on this day and at this hour, to have the honour of talking to your Highness——"

"Well, now you are here," observed the Prince, with ill-concealed impatience: "and the sooner you explain your business the better."

"If your Royal Highness means me to speak in such a hurry," observed Coffin, "I shall be so flurried——"

"Well, take your own time, then," exclaimed the Prince, throwing himself in the chair upon the back of which he had been leaning; "and I will listen to you as patiently as I can."

"Well, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—you must let me go back to the beginning," resumed the Hangman. "You know that day when you and Lady Ernestina Dysart found me locked fast in that queer-fashioned chair at Leveson House; and then your Royal Highness told me that if I would help you and her ladyship in the scheme you had in hand to get rid of Mr. Dysart, you would give me a couple of hundred guineas. Of course I snapped at the bargain. Two hundred guineas wasn't to be sneezed at; and then, too, you promised that the Sheriff should be empowered to offer a free pardon to any man who would accept the office of Jack Ketch. All this suited me uncommon well; and on the day of execution I transmogrified myself into a black fellow, so as to mix unknown and unrecognised in the crowd. All went on right enough: the Sheriff made the proclamation—and I volunteered. My eyes! what a shout the people gave!—how frightened they was of being baulked of the hanging-show!—and I dare say they felt uncommon grateful to the blessed institutions of this country that always ensure them Kings, or Prince Regents, or Queens, that are fond of sending their subjects to be tucked up like dogs."

"Spare your comments, fellow," interrupted the Prince, sternly; "and proceed with what you have to say—though for the life of me I cannot understand why you are recapitulating all these incidents."

"Well, my lord — I mean Royal Highness," again resumed Coffin, not exactly heeding the last comment of the Prince: "when once reinstated in my pleasant office of Public Executioner, I went into Dysart's cell and helped your's and Lady Ernestina's scheme most admirably. I plummed Dysart that I had seen the reprieve—heard it read—and had particularly marked the private instructions which directed that it was not to be produced until the very moment the drop was ready to fall. In fact, I did what you told me—which was to buoy him up with hope until the very last, so as not to allow any suspicion to enter his mind or any misgiving to excite a vindictive feeling. So you may thank me, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—and Lady Ernestina too may thank me for amusing Dysart's mind in such a way that he did not see through the trick at the very last and blurt forth to the sheriffs or the chaplain all about your Royal Highness's amour with his wife and about the written document you so solemnly signed. For even if you had not told the Home Secretary, as I suppose you did, to write an official letter to the Sheriff of London about preventing *last dying speeches* on the scaffold, I should have been able to have managed the business all pleasant enough for you, and have eased Dysart's journey out of the world as comfortably as possible."

"Now I conceive you must have brought your long narrative to a conclusion," said the Prince, "and perhaps you will tell me why you have entered into all these particulars——"

"Just to show your Royal Highness how faithfully I behaved," responded the Hangman, with a tone and manner of coarse effrontery, "and how well I followed out all your instructions."

"I do not deny it," observed the Prince, to whom it was gall and wormwood to permit the prolongation of the interview: "but did I not remit you the two hundred guineas which I promised, by the hands of a confidential valet—the same who called upon you yesterday?"

"There's no denying that the two hundred guineas came safe enough," returned the Hangman, "but on mature reflection, I can't help thinking my services were but indifferently paid. If it had been a commoner or even a lord who had employed me, well and good: but for a Royal Highness—a Prince Regent—almost a King and Defender of the Faith into the bargain, as the inscription on the money says—to give such a paltry fee as two hundred guineas——"

"You scoundrel," exclaimed the Prince, now goaded to an intolerable degree of exasperation, "how dare you thus pollute all the sacred names of Royalty?"

"I have no doubt," observed the Hangman, his own effrontery becoming all the more coolly determined and doggedly resolute in proportion as he perceived that the Prince grew excited—because in his heart, like the millions of the people, he had a natural and bitter hatred against everything belonging to Monarchy and Royalty,—"I have no doubt," he said, "that you think I am precious free and precious impudent: but it matters damned little to me what you do think. Perhaps you will tell me I am a thief? I should very soon answer that you, who wring the last farthing out of the people in the shape of taxation to support your luxuries and debaucheries, are quite as much a robber in your way——"

"Enough of this," cried the Prince, deeply humiliated and bitterly repenting the day when he placed himself in the power of such a diabolical ruffian. "What is it you require of me—what do want?"

"Well," returned the Hangman, unable to resist the opportunity for another jest, "I might in reason ask your Royal Highness to create me a Duke or a Marquis—for there's many a man quite as bad as I am raised to the Peerage for doing the dirty work of Royalty. But my tastes don't exactly go that way. I like money better than titles——"

"Ah! then you want money?" said the Prince, eagerly catching at the means of getting rid of this dreadful visitor.

"Well, I should have thought you might long ago have guessed this much. The fact is," continued Coffin, "I am going to scrape together as much money as I possibly can get, for the purpose of emigrating to America——"

"Oh! then I shall cheerfully assist you," exclaimed the Prince, the sudden relief which this announcement gave him, producing an expression of joy upon his features. "How much do you require?"

"Well, I don't think your Royal Highness could expect me to do with less than five hundred guineas——"

"You shall have that amount," said the Prince: "but I cannot give it you now. In a few days you may rely upon receiving it. But how is it to be conveyed to you? I cannot send my valet to your residence any more: it compromises me too much in his eyes. Nor can I allow you to come hither again: the risk of your being observed is too great——"

"Well, if your Royal Highness will only tell me the when, the where, and the how," said the Hangman, "I will be punctual."

"I have it!" exclaimed the Prince; "an idea has struck me! Lady Ernestina Dysart is so deeply mixed up in this business, that she must help me in it."

"Ah! to be sure," observed Coffin: "your Royal Highness can send her to meet me somewhere and hand me over the money."

"This day week—at eleven o'clock at night—and on Westminster Bridge," said the Prince Regent. "Be that the appointment."

"Well and good," rejoined the Hangman. "But to make it more definite, suppose we say that Lady Ernestina, or whoever you may send, will find me seated in the recess over the middle arch, on the left-hand side of the bridge as you cross it."

"It is a bargain," observed the Prince. "And now you may leave me."

Daniel Coffin accordingly retired by the private staircase, the Prince following him to unfasten the door at the bottom.

We need hardly inform our readers that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was so astounded — so amazed—by all he had just heard, that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. If he had occasionally failed to catch a few words here and there, in the preceding colloquy, he had nevertheless heard the greater portion,—enough indeed to make the whole tremendous episode in the Prince's career perfectly plain to his compre-

hension. That his Royal Highness should have so deeply committed himself with such a man as Daniel Coffin, was more than enough to confound the Baronet and stagger his belief. Indeed, as he moved slowly away from the glass-door at the conclusion of the scene, he asked himself, "Is this a reality, or is it a vision?—am I awake, or walking in my sleep?"

Quitting the ante-chamber, threading the long passage, and crossing the landing once more, the Baronet wended his way back to Venetia's boudoir—on entering which, he found her alone, reclining on the sofa and wrapped in profound meditation

"I have returned," said the Baronet, "simply because I may have an alteration to make in our proceedings of to morrow night. Something has occurred which is suggestive of a change of tactics, placing indeed the principal inmates of Leveson House more completely in my power than ever. But I shall not now trouble you with expalantions,

Venetia: suffice it for you to know that you shall not only baffle the Marquis, but likewise behold him so deeply humiliated that he shall throw himself at your feet in an agony of terror—a grovelling, servile, miserable wretch!"

"Oh! if you can accomplish all this," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance, a few moments before so pensive, now lighting up with joy,—"you know not how happy you will render me, and how deeply, deeply grateful I shall prove."

"Fear not, dear Venetia," responded the Baronet, "that I shall fail in accomplishing all I promise. Indeed," he added, with a look of profound and tender meaning, "the reward held out is sufficient to excite me to even superhuman exertions in your cause."

"And that reward shall not be withheld," murmured Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance.

The compact was sealed with a fond embrace; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon took his departure.

CHAPTER CII.

THE ROYAL BROTHER AND SISTER.

About an hour after the occurrences just related the Prince Regent received a pressing note from his sister the Princess Sophia, begging that he would call upon her as soon as possible. Her Royal Highness occupied apartments in St. James's Palace; and thither the Prince accordingly repaired.

We have stated in a preceding chapter that the Princess Sophia was now about thirty-eight years of age—of luxuriant embonpoint, and of very handsome countenance. But the traces of deep care were visible upon her features; and without rising from her chair in the elegant apartment where she received her brother, the royal lady bade him in a languid tone place himself near her, as she wished to consult him on a matter of the utmost importance.

The ladies who were in attendance upon the Princess, had withdrawn in obedience to a sign which she made on the entrance of her brother; and this circumstance, together with the deep melancholy which appeared in Sophia's manner, and the look of mingled mystery and hesitation with which she regarded him, proved that it was indeed some affair of more than usual importance that had induced her thus to send for him.

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" asked the Prince, who was conscious of so many misdeeds of his own and so many errors and frailties on the part of every member of his family, that he was always apprehensive of detection, exposure, or retribution.

"Nothing has occurred that need give you any particular annoyance," replied the Princess: then after a few moments' pause, during which the colour went and came upon her cheeks even under the artificial bloom which a cosmetic shed thereon, she continued to observe, "The advice which I seek at your hands, especially regards my own happiness."

"And yet you seem afraid of speaking outright," remarked the Prince, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes," said the Princess Sophia, her eyes filling with tears; "because it is a painful thing for a sister to speak to a brother of her frailty and her shame."

"For heaven's sake explain yourself!" exclaimed the Prince, starting uneasily, and then fixing a penetrating look upon his sister. "Would you have me understand that you have *again* formed some connexion which is likely to threaten you with disgrace and dishonour?"

"No, no!" returned the Princess, hastily and almost indignantly. "It is concerning the secret of my early years that I would speak to you—a secret that has so long been known to you——"

"Yes—the affair in the Edgeware Road," interrupted the Prince. "But what danger threatens to transpire therefrom? Lady Florimel surely has not betrayed you?"

"Lady Florimel is the most admirable of women," exclaimed the Princess; "and I believe that she would die to serve me. It is not my secret that is menaced, but my happiness that is deeply, deeply compromised—that is to say, such little happiness as circumstances have permitted me to retain from the wreck of all the generous feelings, fervid affections, and buoyant hopes of youth."

"And so long as your secret is safe," observed the Prince, somewhat disgusted with the sentimentalism now exhibited by his sister, "why the devil should you be unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" she echoed, with a bitter laugh. "Should I not be something less or something more than woman, were I really and truly happy? Or think you, George, that I can possibly blind myself to the fact that our family—the Royal Family of England—is rapidly becoming an object of loathing, hatred, and scorn to the great masses of the community? Is it not said openly, that our unhappy sire has gone mad through remorse at his own crimes and anguish at the misdeeds of his children? Has it not been even more than hinted that our brother Ernest was the murderer of Sellis? And you will excuse me for reminding you, my dear George, that the press has been recently more busy than ever with *your* name——"

"A truce to all this recapitulation of evils!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, suddenly. "You are in a melancholy mood, Sophia—your spirits are depressed—and therefore you are giving way to the gloomiest forebodings. Was it to entertain me with your miseries and make me as miserable as yourself, that you have sent for me hither?"

"How unkind of you to speak thus!" cried the unhappy Princess, bursting into tears: for the conduct of her brother on the present occasion seemed more than usually heartless, especially as she herself was more than ever in need of affectionate sympathy.

"Well, well," said the Prince, somewhat softening towards his sister; "tell me what advice you seek at my hands, or what service you require of me."

"Listen to me patiently for a few minutes, and you will then understand wherefore I am thus unhappy," said the Princess, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You are aware, dear George," she continued, with looks slightly averted—as if she dared not meet his gaze while touching upon the present topic,—"you are aware that upwards of nineteen years have now elapsed since I became a mother. The babe was entrusted to a surgeon of the name of Thurston—the same who has since risen to such eminence and acquired so great a renown as a physician. About two months ago, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I called upon Lady Florimel and besought her to institute inquiries relative to the fate of that son whom from its very birth I had thus abandoned to the care of strangers. My dear friend Pauline at once undertook the commission; and she called upon Doctor Thurston, from whose lips she learnt that the child had been stolen in its infancy. Indeed, it was in the month of June, 1795, when the child was between five and six months old, that it was thus stolen from the arms of its nurse in Hyde Park. Doctor Thurston knows that the child was mine—has known it indeed for a very long time: but he has kept the secret inviolable. His honesty—his integrity—in this respect, at once convinced Pauline that he was telling the truth when he stated that the child had been stolen. Moreover, he showed her a printed hand-bill which was circulated at the

time, bearing the date I just now mentioned, and offering a reward for the recovery of the child. Lady Florimel was, as you may suppose, profoundly grieved for my sake on hearing such terrible intelligence from Doctor Thurston: but she nevertheless deemed it her duty to report the whole truth to me. What my feelings have since been I shall not attempt to describe: suffice it to say that while picturing the most horrible destinies for the unhappy progeny of my youthful weakness, I have looked upon myself as the most unnatural of mothers! But in the mean time—since that interview between Lady Florimel and Doctor Thurston—the head officer of Bow Street has been employed by the physician to discover if possible some trace of the lost one——"

"Ah! Lawrence Sampson," ejaculated the Prince. "He is a clever fellow. But I hope that Thurston did not entrust him with your secret?"

"No," said the Princess: "Doctor Thurston represented that it was his own child who had been lost. And this Mr. Sampson has succeeded not only in discovering that the lost one is alive, but also where he is and the manner he has been brought up."

Here the Princess Sophia burst into a flood of tears; and her voice was choked with the convulsive sobs that rent her bosom.

"Where is the boy?" inquired the Prince; "and in what sphere of life has he been trained? I am afraid that you have nothing very satisfactory to impart on this point——"

"Good heavens! what a dreadful idea is it for a mother to contemplate!" exclaimed the Princess, wringing her hands in bitterest anguish; but suddenly regaining the fortitude of despair, she dashed the tears from her eyes, and turning her looks steadfastly upon her brother, said in a deep and solemn tone, "My son—the offspring of my early crime—has been trained amongst the vilest of the vile—dragged through all the mire, feculence, and corruption of demoralization—inured to depravity—steeped to the very crown of his head in all moral abominations—and now—O God! that a mother's tongue should have to proclaim so hideous a fact!—and now, I say, he is in the service of a man who occupies the basest, the most loathed, scorned, and abhorred position that is to be found at the bottom of the social scale——"

"To whom do you allude?" demanded the Prince, who in spite of his intense selfishness and his cold-blooded indifference to the sorrows of others, could not help being somewhat touched by the spectacle of his sister's dread despair, as likewise by the appalling interest that belonged to this narrative which she was reciting:—"who is the man that you thus speak of as being the master or employer of the lad?"

The Princess Sophia turned upon her brother a look full of unutterable misery, as she said in a low and scarcely audible tone, "Who is that man?—it is the Public Executioner!"

"What, Daniel Coffin!" ejaculated the Prince, the mention of the dreadful man appearing ominous to a degree, inasmuch as but little more than an hour had elapsed since he and his Royal Highness had stood face to face in the splendid saloon at Carlton House. "This fellow now seems destined to spring up frequently in my path," thought the Prince within himself: and the feelings of disgust, annoyance, and even alarm which he thus experienced, were reflected in his countenance.

"Oh! you may well be horrified and terror-stricken!" exclaimed the Princess, not altogether comprehending the spring of her brother's emotions; for she was of course utterly unaware of the fact that the Common Hangman was personally known to the Prince Regent of the Kingdom.

"But what do you propose to do in the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness: "or what do you wish or expect that I should do for you?"

"Hear me out—and then you will understand wherefore I have sent for you. For nearly two months," continued the Princess, "has Doctor Thurston been aware that the unfortunate youth is alive and in the service of that dreadful man: but not until yesterday had the physician the courage to communicate to Lady Florimel the result of Mr. Lawrence Sampson's researches. Indeed, it was only when Pauline threatened to call personally upon the Bow Street officer and ascertain whether anything was being done in the matter—it was only then, I say, that Doctor Thurston admitted that Sampson's efforts had already been crowned—too fatally crowned—with success. And now, it would also appear that by a singular coincidence Mr. Sampson, *before* being engaged in that research at all, had fallen in with the youth—had conceived an interest in his behalf—had invited him to his house—and had done all he could to reclaim him from the ways of vice. But although the endeavour seemed to prosper for a few days, those favourable symtoms speedily disappeared; and alas! the youth returned to his old companions, and no doubt to his old habits. All these things did Lady Florimel succeed in gleaning—or rather extorting—from Doctor Thurston's lips yesterday: and this day has she revealed them to me!"

"Then if the youth is so inveterate in his bad habits," observed the Prince, "the best thing will be to leave him where he is."

"How can you recommend such a course?" cried the Princess, in a voice of bitter remonstrance.

"How could you have abandoned him for more than nineteen years?" demanded the Prince coolly.

"Oh! now I am indeed righteously rewarded for my unnatural conduct!"—and as the Princess thus spoke in a voice of rending anguish, she again burst into a flood of tears, at the first outpouring of which her brother made a movement of impatience. "Unnatural mother that I have been," she continued, after a long pause: "most richly, richly do I deserve every reproach—every taunt—every imputation, that can be thrown against me! Nevertheless, it is cruel indeed to receive this chastisement at the hands of a brother!"

"Well, perhaps I was a little harsh," said the Prince Regent: "but do pray tell me at once and without any farther circumlocution, what I can do for you—what you require at my hands?"

"Of all my brothers, you only," said the Princess, "are acquainted with my secret: and therefore, in the first place, it was natural I should confide to your ears all that I have learnt concerning my boy. In the second place, you alone—as Prince Regent—have the power to snatch that unhappy youth away from the career of degradation and depravity which he is pursuing——"

"Sophia!" exclaimed the Prince, bending a stern look upon his sister,—"am I to understand that you propose to place this youth about your person—to have him near you—and make him aware of the secret of his birth?"

"I mean nothing of all this," returned the Princess. "But I wish him to be rescued from that den of infamy where he now is, and to be placed in some honourable position: I wish him to be removed from that grade of life where he is constantly liable to be either tempted or necessitated to do evil! In a word, I wish that he may have a chance and opportunity given him to retrieve his character and to become an honest member of society."

"But how, in the devil's name," cried the Prince impatiently, "am I to accomplish all this? Would you have me send for him—tell him I have heard of his merits—and at once appoint him to the post of valet in my household? Such an idea is ridiculous: he would be coming to my bed-chamber in the middle of the night to cut my throat——"

"Cruel—heartless brother!" shrieked forth the Princess Sophia: "you are speaking of my own son!"

"And a pretty son, it seems by all accounts, you have allowed him to grow up," retorted the Prince, brutally. "Come, come—let us have no more whining, crying, and whimpering on this point. What you have permitted the boy to become, so he must remain."

"Never!" ejaculated the Princess, starting from her seat and flinging glances of fiery indignation upon the Prince Regent. "No—by heaven!" she exclaimed: "I will sooner peril discovery and run the risk of disgrace, than allow that boy to remain in the vile companionship to which he has been too long abandoned! My conduct as a mother has been execrable to a degree; and I swear that some atonement shall be made now! Assist me if you will: and if not, then disguised in humble apparel, I will myself visit the abode of infamy and horror where that poor boy now dwells!"

"You are mad, Sophia—you are mad!" exclaimed the Prince, in mingled anger and alarm. "Such a proceeding on your part would be attended with the most serious risks: indeed, discovery would be almost inevitable—and if you are once in the power of such a desperate villain as the Public Executioner," he added bitterly, "God help you!"

"Then, George—dear George," said the Princess, the excitement of anger suddenly experiencing a complete reaction as she saw the truth of her brother's reasoning—although she little conjectured how *feelingly* he spoke relative to the Hangman,—"pray assist me to save this boy from utter, utter ruin! Succour me to rescue him ere it be too late! Conceive—only fancy the horror—the ineffable, illimitable horror—that would seize upon my soul were he to be drawn into some crime that would send him to the scaffold! Oh! if my feelings now prompt me to extend a helping hand towards him, what would they do in such a case as that?—should I not be goaded by desperation to dare everything—exposure, dishonour, ridicule, scorn? George—my dear brother!" she exclaimed, throwing herself at his feet and clasping her hands wildly, "listen, I beseech thee, to the prayer of a penitent woman—an agonizing mother—and assist me to save my son!"

"Rise, Sophia—rise," said the Prince, somewhat moved again by the spectacle of his sister's highly wrought anguish. "I will see what can be done in the matter. If the Habeas Corpus was suspended just at this moment, I would soon manage the thing by having him seized—locked up—and subjected to some reformatory process. As it is, I may have him kidnapped and put on board a ship bound for the colonies—taking care to provide for him a good situation on his landing in Canada, Jamaica, or New South Wales, just as the case may be."

"You will consider the matter—you will reflect upon it well?" said the Princess. "But promise me two things."

"Name them," observed his Royal Highness; "and then I will give you my answer."

"In the first place," rejoined Sophia, "promise me that no step shall be taken in the matter without my knowledge and concurrence; and in the second place you must pledge yourself that before the boy quits England for ever, you will by some means or other procure me an opportunity of seeing him for a moment—at some place and under such circumstances as to preclude the possibility of my being recognised by any one."

"And if I do all this for you," said the Prince, after a long pause, during which he remained buried in a deep reverie—"if I do all this for you, I say, will you undertake to do a certain service for me?"

"Oh! yes," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, well pleased at beholding the affair assume the appearance of a bargain; because she knew enough of her brother's selfish disposition to be aware that he was much more likely to do her a favour when he required one in return, than he would be if the obligation were all on one side. "Tell me what service you require at my hands—tell me what I can do for you——"

"By one of the inscrutable impulses of nature," said the Prince, his look suddenly assuming more of what may be termed a religious seriousness than for years past it had ever been accustomed to put on; "your maternal feelings Sophia, have been touched—and evidently to some depth. Whether it be curiosity to behold one's offspring—whether it be some intuitive prompting of latent love—or whether it be one of these impulses which have their origin in a moment of the heart's weakness, I cannot say: but not the less certain is it that I have more than once experienced, within the last year or two, a similar feeling to that which has this day manifested itself in you."

"What mean you, my dear brother?" inquired the Princess.

"I will soon explain myself," he continued. "In the same way that you experienced a desire to behold your son, even if it be only for a single moment—so am I influenced by an earnest longing to cast my eyes, if only for a moment likewise, upon my daughter! You know full well that Florence Eaton—the niece of Lord and Lady Florimel—is my own child—the daughter of that Octavia, Pauline's sister, whom I loved with so profound an adoration!"

"But Florence knows not that you are her father," observed the Princess, gently.

"No—nor is it necessary that she should—not a whit more necessary than that your son should be made aware that you are his mother. You are intimate with the Florimels," continued the Regent, "and you can so manage matters that some day—for a few moments—my daughter may appear in my presence and speak to me, although without being aware that she *is* my daughter!"

"Do you not know, George, that your name is seldom—very seldom mentioned in the presence of Pauline?—for her husband and her friends are ever fearful of reviving the memory of her dead sister."

"Yes—and also because the Florimels regard me as the destroyer of poor Octavia's health, happiness, and life," added the Prince, in a mournful tone: and for an instant he seemed as if remorse had touched his heart—for an expression of unutterable anguish suddenly swept over his countenance. "But it will not be necessary for me and the Florimels to meet," he added immediately; "do you arrange matters in such a way that I may see my daughter for a few moments—that I may hear her voice—that I may compare her with the image of her mother, who is gone—and that, in a word, I may have the satisfaction of beholding my child, although I may not announce myself as her father, but must coldly retain my character as her Prince and the representative of her Sovereign. Do this for me, Sophia—pledge yourself to gratify me in that respect—and I will perform for you all that you have asked in reference to your son."

"It is a compact between us," said the Princess. "To-morrow I will see Pauline upon this subject."

"And I, on my part," rejoined the Prince, "will lose no time in deliberating on the best way to accomplish all you desire in respect to your son."

The brother and sister then separated—the former returning to Carlton House—and the latter remaining in her own apartment at St. James's Palace, to ponder upon the many, many things which sate heavy upon her mind.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE BARONET AND THE HANGMAN.

On the following day, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Daniel Coffin was sitting on the step of his shop-door, smoking a long pipe, and conversing with a neighbour who was doing precisely the same on the opposite side of Fleet Lane. Jack the Foundling was in his own room, reading the history of Dick Turpin: Sally Meknoth was attending to her household duties; and Dick had gone out to pass an hour or two at some skittle-ground. Mr. Coffin was therefore "minding the shop," although he had very few customers at that time of the day, and would much rather have been without them altogether,—the shop being, as we have before informed our readers, a mere "blind" to serve as an ostensible source of income in addition to his official gains and perquisites as hangman.

What the conversation was about which he was carrying on with his neighbour, we do not propose to describe: suffice it to say that it was all of a sudden cut short by an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm on the part of Daniel Coffin, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon ascending the lane.

The reader will not fail to comprehend how it was that the Hangman's equanimity was disturbed for a moment on beholding the Baronet: for there was not only the adventure at Shooter's Hill in which Mr. Coffin was implicated, but there was likewise the grave episode of the fire;—and far more serious still, there was the murder of Nell Gibson. But the Hangman possessed, as we have frequently shown, a wondrous amount of presence of mind; and no sooner were his apprehensions conceived than by a rapid chain of reasoning he set them at rest once more.

"If the Baronet had meant to be nasty about the Shooter's Hill affair, he would have done something at once and not let a dozen days elapse like this. The same may be said about the fire at his house: and moreover any lawyer would tell him that he could not prove it was me and my pals that did it. Then as for the groom—no one can say but what he was burnt alive; for who would think he had been knocked on the head first? Lastly, it's out of all question for anybody to suspect that Nell Gibson has been made away with, except those who did it. So the Baronet can't be coming with the intention of doing me any harm—that's positive!"

Such were the thoughts which swept through the brain of Daniel Coffin; although at the same time he would much rather that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not made his appearance in Fleet Lane at all—for when a person's conscience is not very pure, a shadow will sometimes disturb it.

"Well, Mr. Coffin," said the Baronet, pausing in front of the shop with a good-tempered look; "I have come to pay you a visit, you see."

"So I see indeed," returned the Hangman, with a grim smile: "but I hope there's no ill feeling between us on account of what took place down yonder some little time back."

"Ah! you mean the affair at the *Jolly Waggoner's* and then at Shooter's Hill?" said the Baronet, who, be it understood, did not know who were the authors of the conflagration of his house. "Well, I no doubt ought to owe you a little grudge for that proceeding on your part: but as I came out of it safe and sound, I will say nothing more on the subject. The truth is, I wish to speak to you on another little matter."

"Walk in, sir," exclaimed the Hangman, not only well pleased at finding that he was really free from danger, but also suspecting that the individual who had once stood the chance of being made a victim, was now come as a patron or employer. "Walk in, sir—and if you don't like to talk in the shop, you can step into my parlour—where," he added with another grim smile, "you shall be sure of good treatment."

"Oh! we can talk very well in the shop," returned the Baronet, glancing around, "since there is no one here but ourselves—and I presume we are secure against eaves-droppers?"

"Perfectly so," rejoined the Hangman. "And now, won't you sit down, sir, and make yourself quite at home?"

The Baronet accordingly took a chair, while Daniel Coffin lounged against the mantle-piece,

anxiously awaiting the explanation of his visitor's business.

"I have reason to know," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fixing his eyes upon the executioner, "that you are not altogether unacquainted with the interior of Leveson House——"

"Ah! how the deuce did you discover that?" exclaimed Coffin.

"Never mind how I came to know it," said the Baronet. "It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am acquainted with the fact: and what is more, I have reason to believe that you are not altogether a stranger to those secret apartments in Leveson House one of which contains the curiously contrived arm-chairs."

"By goles!" cried the Hangman, "you seem to know all about it; and if you was ever caught in one of those chairs, you can perhaps judge how pleasant such captivity must be. But pray go on, sir, with what you was saying."

"I wish to know," proceeded Sir Douglas, "whether you could undertake to introduce yourself, at a particular hour, into Leveson House, and there lie concealed behind the curtains in one of the secret apartments until such time as some signal, to be previously agreed upon, should summon you forth?"

"There isn't a house in London that I can't introduce myself into somehow or another; and there isn't a door that I can't open by hook or by crook. But how am I to know," demanded the Hangman, "that all this mayn't be some plant on your part to get me into a scrape and revenge yourself for that little business down at Shooter's Hill?"

"The answer is easy, both to be given and to be understood," replied Sir Douglas. "If I really had the intention of punishing you, I should not condescend to devise a trap to ensnare you; nor should I beat about the bush in a manner alike unnecessary and ridiculous: but I should at once give you into custody, and allow the law to become my avenger. But for the sake of that young woman Ellen Gibson——"

"Ah! she *is* a nice young woman too, notwithstanding all her faults," observed the Hangman, with a diabolical hypocrisy. "We have quite forgiven her for having put you up to the dodge at the hut; because she handed us over the hundred guineas you sent us through her, and so all was right. Well, I am satisfied now on second thoughts, that you don't mean any treachery in getting me to Leveson House: besides which, I always have at least a couple of barkers, and may be a dagger—with sometimes a bottle of vitriol—in my pocket; so that in any case," added Coffin, with a grin of diabolical ferocity, "I should be rather a troublesome customer to grapple with. I think you would sooner catch a lion or a boa constrictor without injury to yourself, than take me alive. A bullet in the brain—a dagger planted in the heart—or a bottle of vitriol smashed on the head——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Baronet, "you need not recapitulate all your modes of defence, because no injury is intended you. The plain facts are these:—The Marquis of Leveson is manœuvring to get a certain lady into his power; and I wish to take this lady's part and compel his lordship to renounce all farther pretensions or claims, if indeed he have any, in that respect. This can only be done by proving that enough is known concerning his niece, Lady Ernestina, to involve her in serious trouble. *You* are the man whose presence at Leveson House on the occasion will strike terror and dismay into the hearts of the guilty ones, and bring matters to an issue that will serve my purpose. Now, do you consent to enact this part in the proposed drama? If so, name your price and it shall be paid—half in ready cash as an earnest of good faith, and the other half when we meet at Leveson House."

The Hangman reflected in silence for a few minutes. According to his arrangement with the Prince Regent on the preceding day, it was most probable that Lady Ernestina Dysart would be the messenger whom his Royal Highness would send to keep the appointment on Westminster Bridge a week thence, and pay over the five hundred guineas. Would it be prudent, then, for the Hangman to adopt a hostile course towards Lady Ernestina, and embark in any enterprise inimical to herself? *This* was the point which Coffin revolved in his mind. But then, on the other hand, here was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, no doubt ready to pay a handsome fee for the service he required; and Coffin was too avaricious and too greedy of gold not to snap at the present bait. Suddenly it struck him that by entering into a scheme thus hostile to Ernestina, it would positively and actually have the effect of rendering her all the more anxious to get him out of the country; and as he had told the Prince that he wanted the five hundred guineas for the purpose of emigrating, her ladyship, on learning that such was the case, would be all the more eager to supply him with the funds for his alleged departure. Besides, suppose that Ernestina should refuse to become the Prince's messenger on the night appointed for the payment of the money on Westminster Bridge, would not his Royal Highness entrust the matter to some other person? Most assuredly; for Daniel Coffin felt that the Prince would do anything rather than stand the chance of being troubled with farther visits from such a person as himself. All things thus considered, the Hangman resolved to accept Sir Douglas Huntingdon's proposal.

"Well, sir," he said, "I have just been thinking over the matter; and I don't see why I shouldn't earn a couple of hundred guineas in this way as well as another."

"From which remark," observed the Baronet, "I understand that you require two hundred guineas as your recompense?"

"Well, sir, I don't think I can do it for less. You see I shall have to get into Leveson House stealthily, as one may say—or at all events, however I may manage to get in, I shall have to creep about on the sly, and so stand the chance of being shot as a burglar."

"I do not object to the amount of the reward you ask," interrupted the Baronet. "On the contrary, here are bank-notes and gold for a hundred guineas:" then, having counted down the money, at the sight of which the Hangman's eyes twinkled with the sinister vibrations that are seen in those of a snake, Sir Douglas Huntingdon said, "It is for to-night that your services are required. By eleven o'clock must you be concealed behind the draperies in one of the rooms belonging to the private suite; and when you hear me say *that the public executioner*

himself can bear testimony to the infamies of those chambers, you must come forth from your hiding-place."

"Then you will be there to-night also?" said the Hangman inquiringly.

"I shall," returned the Baronet. "And now I think we understand each other fully?"

"We do so," rejoined the Hangman.

The Baronet then took his leave; and Daniel Coffin hastened to secure the hundred guineas in some secret place where he was wont to deposit his ill-gotten gains. Then for the rest of the afternoon and evening he amused himself with smoking, drinking, and pondering upon the best means of obtaining ingress to Leveson House.

It was about half-past nine o'clock at night when he secured his pistols, dagger, skeleton-keys, dark lantern, and other burglarious apparatus, about his person; and enveloping himself in a capacious cloak, set off for the West End. It was half-past ten when he reached Albemarle Street; and he walked two or three times up and down in front of Leveson House, in order to ascertain in how many rooms lights were burning, and whether there were many people going out and in—so that he might form an idea whether the house was tolerably quiet or not. The result of his observation was that the mansion was remarkably tranquil: and on the front-door being opened to take in a letter, the Hangman's eyes, plunging into the hall, observed no one loitering there except the porter himself. Accordingly, a minute or two after the messenger had delivered the letter, the Hangman stepped boldly up to the front-door and gave a sort of uncertain double knock, like the timid and hesitating summons of a poor tradesman.

The hall-porter immediately opened the door; whereupon Daniel Coffin, with the coolest impudence imaginable, bestowed a familiar nod upon the official, as if to imply "that it was all right," and walked in without a word. The hall-porter remembered to have seen that ill-looking face before: for indeed, if once viewed, it could not very well be forgotten. He had seen Coffin, be it remembered, on the night that he called to obtain an interview with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and also on the morning when he went thither relative to Ariadne. Besides, as the porter was well aware that some queer characters occasionally visited Leveson House for the purpose of ministering to the intrigues of the Marquis in respect to the fair sex, he was by no means astonished at seeing such an ill-looking fellow as Coffin make his appearance there. Moreover, remembering his face, and observing the air of assurance with which he so coolly entered, the porter naturally supposed that he had come in pursuance of some appointment; and therefore he said not a word, but let him pass on.

This was precisely what Daniel Coffin had calculated upon; and traversing the hall, he ascended the stairs with all the self-sufficiency of a visitor who knew that he was expected. Fortune favoured his enterprise: for he did not encounter a soul as he proceeded up the marble staircase, traversed the landing, and sought the Crimson Drawing-Room. But had he met any of the dependants, he was prepared with some kind of subterfuge to explain his presence in the mansion.

Coffin had previously ascertained, from the observation he had made in the street, that there were no lights in the Crimson Drawing-Room—the situation of which apartment in the house he had experienced no trouble in recollecting, for the memory of the accomplished burglar is rendered keenly acute to all such details as these. The Hangman accordingly entered that drawing-room without the slightest hesitation; and he found it unoccupied and dark, as he had expected. By aid of the skeleton-keys, he at once entered the mysterious suite of apartments, which he had explored on the first occasion of his visit to Leveson House.

Here we must leave Mr. Daniel Coffin for a short time, and transfer the attention of the reader to another apartment in the same spacious and splendid mansion. The chamber to which we now introduce ourselves, is that of Lady Ernestina Dysart: and the beauteous but depraved occupant thereof has just retired thither, it being now nearly eleven o'clock.

But Lady Ernestina felt no inclination to seek her couch. Her naturally fervid temperament and strong passions had recently produced in her a certain restlessness and uneasiness, for which she herself could scarcely account. The consummate hypocrisy of her situation, not only compelling her to wear widow's weeds, but also to maintain the seclusion of a widow, served as it were as a retribution and a punishment. She had no opportunity of gratifying those longings which inspired her, nor of appeasing those passions which devoured her. Were she able to go out into society, how soon might she form a connexion of a tender nature: but cooped up as she was by the necessity of affecting to mourn for the death of that very husband whom she herself had been the means of sending to the scaffold, she was entombed in a seclusion that every day grew more and more intolerable. Her imagination was most prurient and licentious—her disposition both fervid and depraved: and thus her passions, while unappeased, were like serpents gnawing at her vitals.

Hence was it that Lady Ernestina Dysart, on the present occasion, experienced no inclination to retire to rest. She knew that her uncle the Marquis had some intrigue on hand; but what it was, or who its object might be, she was unaware. Nevertheless, the mere thought that an intrigue of such a nature was in progress beneath that roof, was sufficient to give such an impulse to her thoughts as to set her very imagination in a flame. In this morbid state of mind was it that she began to experience an irresistible longing to inspect once more the sculptured and pictorial representations of love and pleasure with which her uncle's private gallery was filled.

Taking up a candle, Ernestina stealthily quitted her room and repaired to that bed-chamber whence there was a private door into the apartment containing the mechanical chairs. That this bed-chamber would no more be used by the Marquis of Leveson, she well knew; inasmuch as the terrible episode connected with Ariadne Varian, had left such an impression upon his lordship's mind as to induce him to order that chamber to be shut up at least for the present. Ernestina therefore felt confident that she ran no risk of discovery by proceeding that way: and locking the outer door after her, she traversed the cham-

ber where poor Ariadne had passed through all the phases of her appalling trance!

Opening the door of the dressing-room by means of the secret spring, Ernestina proceeded into the room adjoining; and thence she passed into the gallery containing the sculptures and the pictures.

Carrying the wax candle in her hand, she proceeded to examine the various groups of statuary and the splendid specimens of the limner's art: but the farther she advanced down the gallery, the more consuming became the passions that were excited in her bosom. Beneath the sable weeds of mourning raged the frenetic desires of a Bacchanal: the virgin white collar which covered her breast, rose and sank with the sensuous palpitations of the heaving globes beneath. Above her flushing countenance sate the widow's cap, of as snowy a purity as the collar upon her bosom: but instead of setting off to advantage a face where Christian resignation was blended with a soft melancholy, its vivid whiteness threw out in stronger contrast the cheeks that were thus crimsoned with the mantling glow of consuming desire. The heart of that woman was a volcano at this moment, as she gloated upon all the refinements of sensuality that were scattered around.

Presently she paused before a mirror stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and reflecting every object in the gallery upon its polished surface. Heavy crimson draperies hung on each side of this mirror, and festooned along the top; so that no gilded frame-work was visible—and the effect thus produced was that of the prolongation of the gallery to a considerable length. Ernestina caught a glimpse of herself in this resplendent mirror, and was about to turn away when she was struck with the deep crimson of her countenance: and feeling the fires that were burning in her bosom, she stood to observe their effect upon her features.

"The face," she thought within herself, "is too faithful a reflex of the human heart. Were any one to see me now, it would be impossible to prevent all my secret thoughts from being probed to the very bottom! Ah! the countenance is indeed a tablet——"

But at this moment Ernestina gave a sudden start as if a viper had bitten her—and the colour fled from her cheeks as rapidly as darkness supervenes in a room at night when the candle is suddenly extinguished.

For, as she stood gazing upon the mirror, she was struck with the sudden apparition of a figure stealing in from the door at the other extremity of the room: and a mortal terror at once seized upon the miserable woman, as she recognised the too well-known form and features of the Public Executioner!

CHAPTER CIV.

TERROR.

It was a wonder that Lady Ernestina did not drop the candle from her hand: but perhaps it was the convulsing horror that seized upon her entire frame that made her fingers grasp it with a spasmodic rigidity.

Scarcely had she caught that glimpse of the Hangman, when he glided suddenly behind a curtain close by the door: and when he had thus disappeared from her view, Ernestina breathed more freely again. Terror loosened the iron grasp which it had fastened upon her, and she experienced a sudden relief on observing that the dreadful man was not coming to accost her then and there!

Calling all her presence of mind to her aid, she turned slowly and in a leisurely manner from the mirror, and took a seat in one of the superb chairs which were placed at intervals along the gallery. These chairs, be it understood, were *not* provided with any treacherous mechanism; and Ernestina thus sat down, not so much to collect her thoughts as because the sudden terror she had just experienced made her limbs feel heavy and had stricken her as it were with the numbness of sore fatigue.

Placing the candle upon the pedestal of a statue, she leant her head upon her beautiful white hand—wondering within herself what on earth the Hangman could possibly be doing within the walls of Leveson House again. That he had come not to seek her, was pretty evident—inasmuch as he had just concealed himself behind a curtain, doubtless imagining that his presence and proceeding were not perceived in the mirror. Then, what was he doing there? Had he come to rob the house?—or was he in any way engaged in the intrigue which her uncle had in hand for that night? This was the most reasonable supposition that presented itself to Ernestina's mind; and she felt convinced it must be a correct one. For she had heard from the Marquis that it was Daniel Coffin who had brought Ariadne Varian to Leveson House; and therefore it did not appear extraordinary that he should be again employed in the nobleman's service.

Having come to the conclusion that she had thus solved the mystery of Daniel Coffin's presence there on the present occasion, Lady Ernestina became deeply anxious to quit the gallery and return to her own room. She felt as if she were in the vicinage of some fearful though hidden danger. It was the feeling which may be supposed to inspire the Hindoo traveller, when passing beneath the overhanging branches of a wood where boa constrictors are known to lie in ambush, ready to dart down upon their prey. Indeed, nothing could equal—and assuredly nothing could transcend—the horror which Ernestina entertained for that terrible individual,—not so much because she knew him to be the most consummate of scoundrels—nor because he was the public executioner, whose very hands might almost be supposed to feel clammy with the touch of the strangled dead—but because he had dug the grave in which her paramour was interred at the Blackheath villa!

Conquering her emotions as well as she was able, and assuming as calm and placid a demeanour as she could possibly put on, Ernestina rose from the chair—took the candle—and moved towards the door. But she felt herself shuddering—she felt herself quailing—she felt, too, that it was almost impossible to look unconcerned, or to seem as if she fancied herself alone in that place: for her very sensations told her that from behind the curtain near the door, the sinister looks of the Public Executioner were fixed upon her! Recurring to

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the illustration of the Hindoo traveller, we may observe that the effect was with Lady Ernestina the same as if she had to pass a place whence a snake would fling forth its hideous length and wind itself with rapid whirling coils around her—and as if she already beheld the eyes of the reptile gleaming forth at her from its ambush. Thus, with increasing trepidation—with a nervousness rapidly amounting to an excruciation—did she advance towards the door. She was apparently looking straight forward: and yet with a sort of side-long gaze was she watching that curtain behind which the Hangman was concealed—as if every moment she expected it to be flung aside and display the terrible intruder.

But Ernestina's appalling fears were not realized: the curtain remained closed—and all was still—all was tranquil behind it. She reached the door, which stood open: she passed into the next room—and then she threw a shuddering look over her shoulder, to see if the Hangman were not behind her. But no one was there: and regaining courage, she pressed the secret spring to open the admirably-contrived door in the wainscot. Passing out of her uncle's mysterious, or rather infamous suite of apartments, she traversed the dressing-room and the bed-chamber and emerged upon the landing; where the rapid glance which she flung around at once reassured her that no one was nigh. Breathing now with comparative freedom, she ascended to her own chamber; and locking the door, she flung herself into an arm-chair, exhausted with the overwhelming effects of the few minutes of stupendous terror through which she had just passed.

And now the thought struck her that if the Marquis of Leveson had not really engaged the services of Daniel Coffin for some intrigue or another, it was absolutely necessary he should be informed of the presence of that individual within the walls of the mansion. But then—what excuse could she allege for having been in that gallery?

Depraved as she was—depraved as her uncle was—and depraved as they knew each other thus to be, Ernestina nevertheless shrank from the idea of looking the Marquis in the face and confessing that her heated imagination had alone impelled her to visit his museum of artistic devilries and exquisite abominations. She therefore resolved to allow matters to take their chance, though she herself would not be able to seek her couch that night with the knowledge that Daniel Coffin was concealed about the premises.

While these thoughts were still agitating in her mind, she was startled by a sudden knocking at her chamber-door: and hastening to open it, she perceived that it was her lady's-maid.

"Ah! my lady," exclaimed the girl, "I am glad that your ladyship has not yet retired to rest."

"Why?—what has happened?—is anything the matter?" demanded Ernestina, all sorts of terrible things connected with the Hangman springing up in her imagination.

"Oh! nothing that I know of, my lady," replied her maid: "but his lordship's valet has just told me to run up and inform your ladyship that the Marquis would be glad to see you immediately if you were not yet undressed."

"Where is his lordship?" asked Ernestina, wonder now somewhat taking the place of terror.

"In the Gilded Saloon, my lady," was the response: "and I believe that there is company with his lordship."

"Who can they be? and what can this mean?" said Lady Dysart, in a low musing tone, as she hastily surveyed herself in a looking-glass to make sure that her toilette was in becoming order ere she obeyed the summons from the Marquis of Leveson.

But we must here digress for a little space in order to make our readers understand how it was that Ernestina's presence was thus peremptorily required at nearly half-past eleven o'clock at night in the Gilded Saloon.

CHAPTER CV.

THE WITNESS.

On this same evening Miss Bathurst gave an entertainment at her house in Stratton Street; and amongst the guests were Lord and Lady Sackville—the former, as the reader will remember, being the nephew of the hostess.

Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were staying with Miss Bathurst, and consequently they were of the party. Lady Curzon was also present; and if Venetia had not been there, the diadem of Beauty's Queen might have been placed upon the brow of Editha. But every star of fashion—every luminary of the aristocratic world of female charms—was eclipsed by the brilliant Venetia; and while she enjoyed the universal homage of the male sex, she was at once the object of envy and adoration on the part of the ladies. In the former instance her beauty was the principal talisman of her more than imperial sway: in the latter, the secret of her power was the fact that she was the Royal Favourite.

But while Venetia, immediately after her arrival at Miss Bathurst's, became the radiant centre of an adoring group, her husband had engaged the Countess of Curzon for the first dance. Until this evening, Horace and Editha were not particularly well known to each other: they had often met in the *reunions* of fashion, it was true—but when the young man was plain *Mr. Sackville*, he had attracted no special notice on Editha's part. Now, however, that he was *Lord Sackville*, the case was mighty different; and as he accosted her on the present occasion, she greeted him with her sweetest smile. He sate down by her side—and as he gazed furtively upon her, it struck him that she was assuredly a most beautiful creature; while on her part, Editha wondered that she should never have before noticed how exceedingly handsome in person and elegant in manners was Lord Sackville. Being thus mutually pleased, they soon fell into a very agreeable and interesting strain of conversation until the quadrille began. Then they danced together—and when the quadrille was over, they went into the music-room: and Editha, being a proficient with the guitar—at that period a fashionable instrument—consented to practise a duet with Lord Sackville. Now, as there were very few persons in that apartment at the time—the greater portion of the guests being in the quadrille-rooms—Lord Sackville and Lady Curzon were enabled to amuse themselves without much constraint: and what with a little singing and more tender looks, varied by some agreeable discourse, they soon came to be very much pleased with each other.

Venetia, while lounging through the rooms upon the arm of some adoring Duke, caught sight of her husband bending over Editha with tender looks: and for an instant the flush of jealousy mantled upon her cheeks—but only for an instant! No sooner was the jealous sentiment conceived, when it was followed by the thought that she had no right to entertain it. Not only was there a compact between her husband and herself that they were both to pursue their own pleasures independent of the moral restraint of the connubial vows; but she had already availed herself of that immunity in admitting the Earl of Curzon to her arms. Banishing the jealous sentiment, therefore, she bestowed upon Editha a most affable salutation, and on her husband a look of cordial familiarity, as she passed them by: and bidding her ducal companion conduct her back to the quadrille-rooms, she left her husband and Editha to continue their *tête-à-tête* without constraint.

But at about a quarter to eleven Venetia stole away from the gay scene and the brilliant throng: and retiring into Miss Bathurst's own bed-chamber, she put on a bonnet provided with a thick veil, and threw a capacious mantle over her elegant ball-dress. Then, hastily descending the stairs, she proceeded on foot to Albemarle Street, which, be it remembered, is only two minutes' walk from Stratton Street: and as the night was fine and dry, she accomplished that trifling distance without any inconvenience.

But let us now return to the interior of Leveson House, thus preceding Lady Sackville's visit thither; and we shall see what preparations the amorous Marquis has made for her reception.

Remembering that on the previous occasion of Venetia's visit to his mansion, she had been shown to the Crimson Drawing-room, whence she had penetrated into the adjoining suite of chambers, Lord

Leveson now deemed it fitting to receive her in another apartment. Accordingly, he had ordered the most sumptuous room in his mansion, and which bore the title of the *Gilded Saloon*, to be prepared for the occasion. And well did that apartment deserve its title: for nothing could be more sumptuous—nothing more superb. The ceiling was painted to represent the most curious mosaic work inlaid with gold: the cornices were massive, elaborately carved, and covered with gilding;—the walls were painted a rich blue that served as a ground for a tracery of arabesques executed in gilding. The draperies were of purple velvet, with massive golden fringes sweeping the thick carpet, which was of a pattern to match the walls and curtains. The chandeliers were suspended to the ceiling by gilt chains; and every article of furniture consisted of rosewood inlaid with gilding. The mantels—for there were two fireplaces in this spacious room—were covered with the richest or-molu ornaments: and thus when the wax-tapers were lighted the effect produced by the whole scene was grand, gorgeous, and magnificent to a degree.

It was in this sumptuous apartment that the Marquis of Leveson anxiously awaited the coming of Venetia at about ten minutes to eleven. The reader has already seen enough of his character to comprehend what his feelings must have been, and how his passions were excited, at the prospect of the delicious victory which now at length appeared to be within his reach. For he thought to himself that the most splendid woman England ever produced—a woman of such incomparable loveliness that not even the most fastidious critic could find aught to cavil at in feature, contour, or mien—was coming to abandon herself to his arms! He felt that all the joys and pleasure of his long life, if taken together and made to distil in their aggregate all the essence of bliss, were still dull and insipid when compared with the transcending happiness—the ineffable concentration of elysian delights which now appeared to be in store for his enjoyment.

The time-pieces on the two mantels chimed eleven; and while the silvery sounds were still vibrating in the perfumed air of the Gilded Saloon, the door was thrown open by the discreet Brockman—and a lady, enveloped in a cloak and with a black veil folded two or three times over her countenance, was ushered into the presence of the Marquis. The door instantaneously closed behind her; and raising her veil, she revealed the splendid countenance of Lady Sackville.

"You are come, my dear Venetia—you are come!" said the Marquis, flinging himself upon his knees before her. "And now do I apologise—most sincerely, most earnestly—indeed most humbly apologise—for any harsh or insulting words to which I may have given utterance *yesterday*. I spoke of revenge: but heaven knows I am incapable of experiencing a vindictive feeling now! Nothing but love shall engage my thoughts: nothing but adoration and worship can entrance my soul in your presence. Oh! if it were possible that you could so far forgive me on account of the past as to gaze upon me—not with a look expressive of the deep consciousness of a sacrifice—but with smiles indicative of unalloyed tenderness,—Oh! do this, Venetia—regard me thus kindly—tell me that you no longer cherish animosity towards me—and what is there that I am not prepared to do for thee? My fortune—my wealth—everything—shall be laid at your feet—be placed at your disposal: and while none need suspect our amour, you can still remain the Royal Favourite, and yet render the Marquis of Leveson, who now kneels at your feet, supremely happy!"

When first Lady Sackville had raised the dark veil, her countenance became somewhat serious, although by no means expressive of any very strong emotion—because she had nothing to fear nor to inspire her with loathing and disgust at the part which she was acting, inasmuch as she felt assured of being rescued from the necessity of making the crowning sacrifice. When she beheld the Marquis throw himself on his knees, she could not help experiencing a sensation of pride and triumph at the consciousness of that power of beauty which thus humbled princes and nobles at her feet: and then, as Leveson contrived to pour forth his rhapsody of mingled adulation, apology, entreaty, and dazzling proposal, the light of satisfaction grew more radiant upon her features—for she saw how his hopes were elevated, and she joyed in the prospect of that revenge which would speedily convert them into the bitterest disappointment.

"My lord," she said, gently withdrawing the hand which he had snatched while uttering the last few words of his impassioned address, "I beseech you to rise from this suppliant posture. It ill becomes a great and powerful nobleman such as you, to kneel at the feet of an unpretending woman such as I."

"O angelic creature!" exclaimed the enraptured Marquis, his head too much lost in dreams of bliss to allow him to notice the slight accent of sarcasm with which Venetia had spoken; "you speak of yourself with a humility that is too disparaging!—for the whole world of taste, fashion, and aristocracy recognizes in you the peerless queen of beauty."

"And doubtless these united worlds of which your lordship speaks," said Venetia, with an irony charmingly veiled beneath a smile, "have deputed you to become the mouthpiece of their flatteries."

"Flatteries!" cried the Marquis, starting to his feet; "they are truths—irrefragable, patent, delicious truths! But do you not intend to lay aside this cloak which envelopes a form combining the graces of Venus with the luxuriance of Flora, the majesty of Juno, and the imposing splendour of Diana?"

"Ah! my lord," interrupted Venetia, with a merry laugh, "you would personify in me all the attributes of the heathen divinities!"

"Every idea of beauty which I can possibly conceive," said the Marquis, gazing upon Venetia with the devouring eyes of passion, "must be called into request to depict your loveliness. But let me remove that invidious bonnet with its great thick veil—let me loosen the strings of this shrouding mantle ——"

"Hush! some one approaches!" ejaculated Venetia: and she drew the veil over her countenance.

At the same moment a knock at the door of the saloon was heard; and the Marquis hastened to see who was there—muttering to himself, "Perdition! what can this interruption mean? I ordered that on no account was I to be disturbed;"—then on opening the door and beholding his valet Brockman, he demanded in an impetuous tone, "What do you want?"

"This gentleman insists upon seeing your lordship. He would take no excuse—and indeed he

has even thought fit to follow me hither;"—and as Brockman thus spoke, he looked round towards some one behind.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Marquis, an expression of bitter annoyance and deep misgiving suddenly appearing upon his countenance, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon advancing along the passage leading from the principal landing to the portal of the Gilded Saloon.

"My dear Marquis," said the Baronet, in a friendly—or indeed with the familiar manner of former times,—"I wished most particularly to speak to you: and knowing that I am at all times welcome, I persisted in making Brockman introduce me hither. He is a very excellent servant, I know: and therefore I forgive him the little impertinence implied in the supercilious manner with which he spoke of me as *this gentleman*,—just for all the world as if he did not know me as well as his own master."

"But my dear Huntingdon," said Lord Leveson, in a tone of remonstrance, "I am engaged—delicately engaged at this moment——"

"Not too delicately to receive an old friend like me," returned the Baronet: and without more ado, he walked straight into the Gilded Saloon.

The Marquis, who saw some evil intent lurking beneath the affected good humour of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, made a sign for the valet to withdraw: and closing the door again, he turned with deep anxiety towards Venetia, to ascertain by her proceedings whether this intrusion was a pre-arranged scheme between the intruder and herself.

"My lord," said the Baronet, now suddenly throwing off the mask of familiarity, which he had worn in the presence of the valet for the purpose of preventing that menial from suspecting that anything extraordinary was in progress,—"my lord," he said, adopting a stern and imperious tone, "you will have the kindness to request the attendance of your niece Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"My niece!—and wherefore?" exclaimed the Marquis, as much in amazement as in anger.

"Because I wish to say a few words in her ladyship's presence," rejoined the Baronet, with the tone and look of a man who meant to enforce his designs and had the power to do so.

"But wherefore my niece?" cried the Marquis, now trembling with the appprehension of something wrong. "Would you expose me in her presence?"

"My lord, I have no doubt," answered the Baronet, with a peculiar smile, "that her ladyship is tolerably well aware of all your lordship's proceedings. Was she not your accomplice in inveigling Miss Louisa Stanley ——"

"Ah! the mention of that name," exclaimed the Marquis, with an expression of fiendish malignity, "reminds me that if there is to be exposure on one side, there shall be exposure on the other—and that if you mean to proclaim any secret matters connected with the name of *Leveson*, I shall hold myself justified in making public all I know in connexion with the name of *Stanley!*"

"You will tell a different story presently," said the Baronet, with a look which made the Marquis quail, for he felt how deeply he was already in Huntingdon's power on account of the affair of Ariadne, and he likewise saw full well the Baronet had somehow or another obtained a still deeper hold upon him than even *that*—but how or in reference to what circumstance he could not conjecture.

"Will you explain yourself, Huntingdon?" accordingly asked the bewildered and terrified nobleman: "will you tell me what all this means? Venetia, I appeal to you—is it to be peace or war between us?"

"A treaty of peace, if you will," responded Lady Sackville, who had hitherto remained a silent but not uninterested witness of the scene: then raising her veil and bending her indignant looks upon the Marquis, she added, "But it must me a treaty of peace accompanied by guarantees and securities—and those can only be explained in the presence of Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"Lady Sackville's remark furnishes the key to the whole business," observed the Baronet: "and to cut the discussion short, I do *this*:"—then, as he pulled the gilded bell-rope, he said, "Now your lordship can give orders for Lady Ernestina to be fetched hither."

Brockman speedily answered the summons: and Lord Leveson, mastering his emotions as well as he was able, gave him that message which, as the reader has already seen, was delivered to Ernestina through the medium of her lady's-maid.

When Ernestina, in pursuance of this message, repaired to the Gilded Saloon, she first noticed her uncle pacing uneasily to and fro: then her eyes rested upon the Baronet, to whom she bowed with haughty coldness, while a blush at the same time suffused her countenance, as she felt that he must entertain a very mean and contemptuous opinion of her indeed after her conduct in the affair of Louisa Stanley. But her looks, speedily flitting away from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fell upon the countenance of Venetia, whom she knew by sight, having once or twice beheld her riding in her carriage in the park.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the Baronet, "this is Lady Sackville."

A scarcely perceptible bow took place on either side: for those two women felt that they stood as enemies in each other's presence. But even while thus exchanging this slight salutation, they darted upon each other a look of scrutinizing curiosity. Indeed, the two handsomest ladies in London—perhaps in all England—were at this moment face to face: and the mutual hostility which they experienced, arose not from the comparatively lofty rivalry of beauty, but from the meaner and more paltry cause that each was acquainted with certain secrets regarding the other, thus placing them as it were mutually in each other's power.

"Now that her ladyship is present," Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened to observe, "we will with your permission, my lord, repair to the Crimson Drawing Room."

"And wherefore?" demanded Leveson, gazing in stupid astonishment upon Sir Douglas, while Lady Ernestina grew more and more nervous every instant.

"You will see anon," was the Baronet's reply. "Wherefore waste time in useless questions and answers?"

"True," muttered the Marquis, feeling that the sooner all suspense was got rid of, the better. "Come then to the Crimson Drawing Room."

And Lord Leveson accordingly led the way thither, followed by Venetia (who drew her veil

down), Ernestina, and the Baronet. Brockman, whom they encountered on the landing, hastened to light the wax candles in the drawing-room in obedience to his lordship's order. When this was done and the valet had retired, both the Marquis and Ernestina bent their looks with evident anxiety upon the Baronet for an explanation of his proceedings: but they were still more amazed and likewise alarmed, when Huntingdon advanced towards the door opening into the mysterious suite of apartments. Finding it locked—for the Hangman had fastened it again on passing that way ere now—the Baronet said in a voice which showed that he meant to be obeyed, "Your lordship will be pleased to open this door."

"For what purpose?" asked the nobleman, trembling with the very vagueness of his apprehensions.

But a mortal terror now seized upon Lady Ernestina: for the thought instantaneously flashed to her mind that the presence of Daniel Coffin in that suite of apartments was most probably connected with the present proceeding of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Perceiving, however, the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind for any emergency that might transpire, she exerted all her moral strength to subdue her agonizing emotions and become equal to the ordeal through which it seemed as if she were doomed to pass.

"The key, my lord!" ejaculated Huntingdon impetuously: "wherefore persist in thus wasting valuable time?"

Without giving utterance to another word either of remonstrance or remark, Lord Leveson at once produced the key and opened the door.

"Now let us walk in," said the Baronet, leading the way into the first room of that mysterious suite—not the room, be it understood, containing the mechanical chairs; but the one luxuriously furnished with sofas arranged all around against the walls, in the oriental fashion.

Having brought one of the wax-candles in his hand from the Crimson Drawing Room, Sir Douglas proceeded to light those which stood on the mantel of this elegantly-furnished apartment: and observing that the door into the next room of the suite stood open, he so held the light for a moment as to enable him to plunge his looks across that room, so as to ascertain that the door at the extremity leading into the gallery was likewise opened. These observations he made with inward satisfaction: for he felt confident that wherever the Hangman might be concealed, he would hear the signal previously concerted for his appearance.

While Sir Douglas was lighting the candles, Venetia took a seat upon the sofa, and Lady Ernestina placed herself at a little distance. The Marquis leant his elbow on the mantel, and gazed with evident uneasiness upon the Baronet, who thus so coolly but yet so appropriately acted as Master of the Ceremonies in the proceeding which he himself appeared to have so strangely got up.

"Now, my lord," said the Baronet, throwing himself negligently upon the sofa, "it is time that we should come to an understanding together upon a certain subject. This subject is the claim which you assert with regard to Lady Sackville—a claim which I cannot denominate as one of *love*, nor which I need particularize at all. Suffice it to say that now—this night and for evermore—must a settlement of the matter take place. But how stands the affair? Let us see. Accident has made your lordship acquainted with certain circumstances which Lady Sackville does not wish revealed; whereas your lordship threatens her with a revelation of those circumstances unless she will consent to listen favourably to your overtures. But in *me* behold the sincere, conscientious, and resolute friend of Lady Sackville—once the friend of your lordship, and still disposed to continue your lordship's friend, provided we come to an amicable understanding this night."

"And that understanding?" demanded Lord Leveson, impatiently.

"A treaty of peace," responded Huntingdon, "as Lady Sackville herself hinted ere now: but with such guarantees for its inviolable maintenance on your lordship's part——"

"And those guarantees?" exclaimed the Marquis, interrogatively.

"Listen," rejoined the Baronet: "and a few words will explain them. On the one side you are acquainted with certain secrets relative to Lady Sackville—and you hold them in terror over her: but on the other hand Lady Sackville is acquainted with certain secrets relative to *you*, and therefore she balances her power against your's. The consequence is, that if you expose Lady Sackville, she will expose you: and therefore Lady Sackville and yourself stand upon equal terms."

"No such thing!" exclaimed the Marquis, thinking to himself that if the Baronet's scheme went no farther than this, it was not a very formidable one after all. "For look you, and understand the matter well," he continued, his tone and manner becoming more exultant as he continued. "The things that I know concerning Lady Sackville may be proclaimed without causing any injury to redound upon myself. But this is not the case with her. Let her go and tell that I possess this suite of rooms—explain all the mysteries of that gallery yonder—and she will be confessing that she has visited this museum of exquisite indelicacies and refined immoralities. Tell the tale of the mechanical chairs—say that Lady Sackville herself has been caught in one, and that Louisa Stanley has been similarly ensnared—and will the reputation of either lady be enhanced by proclaiming the fact that they have ever set foot within these rooms? No: for their own sake this tale will be kept quiet. Then, as for the affair of Ariadne Varian, I do not exactly know in what relation the girl may stand to you, Sir Douglas—but I think that if she possess the feelings of delicacy for which you have given her credit in my hearing, she will not thank you for making her history a common topic and herself the theme of general discourse. Therefore, all the secrets which you know concerning me, are secrets which neither *you*, Sir Douglas—nor *you*, Lady Sackville, will choose to proclaim aloud, for your own sakes, and for the sake of those in whom you are interested."

"You therefore believe, my lord," said Huntingdon, "that you stand on the vantage-ground and that you can dictate your own terms to Lady Sackville?"—and as the Baronet thus spoke, his lip curled with a smile of defiance.

"I do believe that I stand upon that vantage-ground," replied the Marquis of Leveson, observing

the smile and not exactly liking it. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes—you force me into farther explanations," rejoined the Baronet. "Have you any regard for your niece Lady Ernestina?—and has her ladyship no secrets which *she* would be sorry to have revealed?"

"'Tis a manly proceeding," exclaimed Ernestina, her cheeks flushing and her eyes darting fire, "for you to make war upon me!"

"It is not I who make war upon your ladyship," answered the Baronet: "it is Lady Sackville who is availing herself of all the weapons of defence with which circumstances have armed her against the Marquis of Leveson. And therefore, if his lordship have really no regard for *you*, Lady Ernestina, he may indeed perhaps occupy the vantage-ground in respect to Lady Sackville: but if on the other hand his lordship has any regard for the reputation and honour of his niece——"

"But what know you of Lady Ernestina?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily: "that she appeared to be placed in a somewhat suspicious position with regard to Louisa Stanley——"

"Certainly that is one fact, my lord," exclaimed the Baronet: "but it is nothing—absolutely nothing—it sinks into utter contempt, in comparison with the part which Lady Ernestina played in sending her own husband to the scaffold!"

A shriek thrilled from the lips of Ernestina, while the Marquis of Leveson started as if suddenly galvanized—and a smile of exultation and gratified revenge lighted up the countenance of Venetia.

"Ah! now you perceive that I am indeed acquainted with secrets of a tremendous import," continued the Baronet, glancing from the startled nobleman to his horror-stricken niece, who sate pale and trembling upon the sofa, gasping for breath, and with her eyes staring wildly: "and now perhaps it can be understood wherefore I deemed it proper—or at all events expedient—for Lady Ernestina Dysart to be present on this occasion? And if you ask me why I chose this apartment as the scene of our discussion, let me remind her ladyship that it belongs to the suite in which a compact was entered into by herself, a certain personage who shall be nameless, and a man holding a fearful and a dreaded office—a compact in virtue of which the late Paul Dysart was cheated by false hope until the very last instant! Therefore as the Public Executioner himself is no stranger to the mysteries and the infamies of this suite of apartments, surely the scene of such atrocities, such devilries, and such abominations as these rooms have witnessed, is the most fitting for such a debate as the present!"

At this moment a shadow darkened the threshold communicating with the next room—and Daniel Coffin made his appearance.

"O God!" groaned Lady Ernestina, in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish: and she covered her face with her hands to shut out that dreadful being from her view.

The Marquis of Leveson gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disgust. As for Venetia, whose veil was thickly folded over her countenance—though for a moment a shudder passed over her form on thus beholding the Public Executioner, yet at the next instant all sense of loathing was absorbed in that of triumph.

"Here is the witness," exclaimed the Baronet, "who can prove whether or not Lady Ernestina Dysart was the means of sealing the doom of her own husband!"

"O God! O God!" groaned the unhappy woman, writhing under the contortions of the heart's transcending anguish.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon," said the Marquis of Leveson, suddenly walking straight up to the Baronet—clutching him by the arm—and speaking in a low hollow tone, "put an end to this dreadful scene and I will accept any terms you choose to dictate. But, for God's sake, spare my niece!"

"Not to me must you appeal, my lord—not to me!" returned Huntingdon: "But to Lady Sackville, whom you have menaced—outraged—humiliated——"

"Ah! hers is the triumph now!" rejoined the Marquis, bitterly: then accosting her abruptly as she sate still closely veiled upon the sofa, he said, "Will your ladyship say one kind word to Huntingdon on our behalf—for the sake of my niece and myself——or shall I fall down upon my knees at your feet——"

"No, no—this is sufficient!" hastily observed Venetia. "Sir Douglas will negotiate with you——"

"Good! ejaculated the Marquis: then with a low bow to Venetia, he drew the Baronet aside, saying, "What are your conditions?—name them——"

"You know them already," rejoined the Baronet: "inviolable secrecy in those matters which have come to your knowledge relative to Lady Sackville—a cessation of all overtures, persecutions, and proposals to her in future——"

"But you ere now spoke of guarantees for the fulfilment of this treaty on my part?" said Lord Leveson, inquiringly.

"Those guarantees—are they not furnished by the circumstances which have just transpired?" demanded the Baronet. "The treaty consists of silence, secrecy, and abstinence from all hostility on your part: and the guarrantee is that if you violate this compact you must expect no mercy to be shown towards your niece, Lady Ernestina."

"Enough, enough—it is a bargain!" returned the Marquis, in a hurried tone. "I abandon all pretension—all hope—in respect to Venetia," he added, in a scarcely audible voice: "but for God's sake, spare my niece—spare my family the infamy that such an exposure," and he glanced towards the Hangman, "would entail upon it!"

"Yes—upon the conditions stipulated you shall be spared that crowning degradation," said the Baronet. "But mark you well!—should the private affairs of Lady Sackville—you know what I mean—become whispered abroad ever so lightly,—should even the faintest rumour of those secrets obtain currency—the authorship will be at once attributed to yourself or to Lady Ernestina: and then pitilessly, without remorse—unhesitatingly indeed—shall everything be divulged concerning the mode adopted to send Dysart to the scaffold and to lull him into security through the medium of the Public Executioner himself! You understand me?"

"I do," responded the Marquis of Leveson, in a low deep tone—more indicative of a sense of utter humiliation than of angry passion.

The Baronet turned away and accosted Daniel Coffin, who for the two or three minutes that had

elapsed since he appeared upon the threshold, had been leaning in a free and easy manner against the door-post, viewing with the sardonic satisfaction of a Mephistophiles the sensation which his presence had excited.

"You may now take your departure," said the Baronet, placing a purse in his hands. "There are the remaining hundred guineas due to you for your services in this matter."

"'Tisn't always that I get two hundred guineas so cheap," observed the Hangman, with a coarse laugh. "Good night, my lord—good night all!" and stalking through the apartment, he issued forth by the door leading into the Crimson Drawing Room.

"Now, Venetia," whispered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as he accosted Lady Sackville; "we also may depart."

Her ladyship accordingly rose from the sofa; and taking the Baronet's arm she accompanied him from the apartment, also passing through the Crimson Drawing Room. She kept the veil well folded over her countenance; but this precaution was scarcely necessary, for they encountered no one on the landing or the staircase—and the hall-porter was so overcome with drowsiness that he actually rose from his great leathern chair to open the door with his eyes shut, thus performing his duty mechanically rather than in full consciousness.

On issuing forth from Leveson House, Lady Sackville was escorted by the Baronet back to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street. There however he left her,—parting from her even before the front door was opened to give her admittance. Nevertheless, ere they had thus separated, a few rapidly whispered words of deep and tender meaning passed between them.

Venetia, hurrying up-stairs to Miss Bathurst's bed-room, threw aside the bonnet and cloak—arranged her hair before the mirror—assumed her brightest looks—and returned into the quadrille-room. There she was immediately surrounded by her admirers, who asked what had become of her for the last hour—for it was now midnight, and she had been a little more than an hour absent. "A temporary indisposition that compelled her to retire," was the ready apology; and many a worshipper expressed his grief to learn that her ladyship should have been indisposed even for an instant. The supper-rooms were now thrown open; and thither Venetia repaired, leaning on the arm of some nobleman. Her husband and the Countess of Curzon were still in each other's company—and Venetia saw that an amour was settled in that quarter.

It was about one o'clock when Lord and Lady Sackville took leave of Miss Bathurst and entered their carriage. During the ride back to Carlton House, which only occupied a few minutes, the husband and wife conversed on perfectly indifferent subjects—for Venetia did not think it worth while to let Horace know what had occurred at Lord Leveson's; and, on his part, he had not observed the temporary absence of his wife from his aunt's brilliant saloons.

On reaching Carlton House, Lord and Lady Sackville ascended to their own suite of apartments; and on the stairs they encountered Jessica, who made a quick and furtive sign of intelligence to her mistress. Venetia understood it well—so well, indeed, that it brought a blush of mingled shame and pleasure to her cheeks. Giving her husband to understand that the Prince proposed to pass the night with her, she hastened to her boudoir—pausing for a moment in the passage to intimate to Jessica that she would dispense with her services till the morning. But on entering the boudoir—on passing into that bower where the wax-tapers burnt upon the mantel and the air was warm and perfumed—the frail but beauteous Venetia was instantaneously clasped, not in the arms of the Prince Regent as she had led her husband to suppose, but in the warm and impassioned embrace of Sir Douglas Huntingdon!

It was therefore to an useful purpose that the Baronet, through his intimacy with the Prince, had learnt the secret of the private entrances to Carlton House; and if he had now availed himself of one of them in order to seek the boudoir of the enchanting Venetia, it assuredly was not without her consent nor without a previous stipulation for so blissful a reward!

CHAPTER CVI

ANOTHER SCENE AT LEVESON HOUSE.

When the Hangman, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and Lady Sackville had quitted the room where the strange and exciting discussion took place, Ernestina slowly withdrew her hands from her countenance and rose from her seat. She was pale—deadly pale; and there was a sort of staggering in her gait as if she experienced a vertigo or was tottering under a load of sorrows too heavy to endure.

"Well, Ernestina—it might have been worse," said Lord Leveson: "pray, therefore, console yourself."

"Good heavens! how can you ask me to console myself?" murmured his niece in a hollow tone; "when you perceive that this tremendous secret of mine is already known where it ought not to be: and who can say how widely it may be repeated again?"

"It is no use to anticipate the worst," said the Marquis, "or to go forward to meet misfortunes as if they did not advance upon us quick enough of their own accord. It is tolerably clear that the villain Coffin has whispered the tale to the Baronet, who has availed himself of it to coerce me into terms on the present occasion," he added, in a tone of bitter vexation.

"Yes, it must be as you say," rejoined Ernestina. "But it is horrible—horrible—to be in the power of that dreadful man!"

"Horrible indeed!" echoed the Marquis. "But how the deuce could he possibly have gained admission into the house? how concealed himself in these rooms?"

"An accomplished villain such as he," replied Ernestina, "can insinuate himself anywhere."

"Ah! I see that I must make a complete garrison of the house against such rascals," observed the Marquis: then in a peevish tone to himself he muttered something expressive of his bitter annoyance at having been defeated—so signally defeated—in his designs upon Lady Sackville.

Ernestina, exhausted in mind and body, and longing to be alone, bade her uncle good night and ascended once again to her own chamber. There she locked the door—flung herself with the listless abandonment of despair upon a seat—and gave way to her bitter reflections. But in the midst of this excruciating reverie, she was suddenly startled by a sound like the rustling of drapery: and this was immediately followed by the noise of something moving in the direction of the bed. The room was spacious; and the fire-place at which Ernestina was sitting was a dozen yards from the couch. Springing to her feet, she held her breath to listen and gazed with straining eyes towards the bed. Heavens! it was indeed no delusion: something was moving—some one was there;—and as the sickening truth struck upon her comprehension, the terrible fear was indeed confirmed by the appearance of a man thrusting himself forth from under the bed. Ah—horror! horror!—it was the Public Executioner!

A shriek—but low, and almost stifled with the harrowing nature of the feelings that produced it—fell from Ernestina's lips as she darted towards the bell-rope. But quick as lightning the thought flashed to her mind that she was so utterly in the man's power as to render exposure of *him* an inevitable step to the exposure of *herself!* She therefore stopped suddenly short—fixed upon him her wildly staring eyes—and with her quivering lips that were as pale as ashes, she gave utterance to a few hoarse words which were well nigh choked by the feelings that swelled up as it were into her very throat.

"What means this intrusion here?" was the demand which her parched tongue and white lips thus framed.

"A pretty question to a man who has done so much for you," exclaimed Coffin, with a horrible leer. "One would really think that you great ladies of fashion hadn't a bit of gratitude about you."

"In one word, what want you?" demanded Ernestina, her heart becoming ice to its centre. "Is it money—more money?—are you insatiable?"

"Insatiable? Yes—but not at this moment for gold—'tis for love," returned the Hangman.

"Love!" echoed Ernestina, with a fearful quivering in the voice: for the design which the wretch's words revealed, suddenly conjured up before her mental vision a new danger—one of even a more tremendous character than any which had previously menaced her.

"And why not *love*?" cried the Hangman, his looks wandering slowly over her fine form with the gloating avidity of brutal passion. "Do you think I hav'n't got the same feelings as other people? And if I am now speaking to you in this manner, you have only yourself to thank for it. I came to this house to-night for quite another purpose: but on finding my way into the gallery just now, who should I see there but your ladyship?"

"True!" murmured the miserable Ernestina, a rush of blood crimsoning her previously pale countenance.

"Ah! now you look handsomer than ever," ejaculated the Hangman. "But as I was telling you, if I had not seen your ladyship in that place filled with such precious objects for a delicate creature like yourself to contemplate, I should never have thought of proposing what I am going to do now. But since as a matter of course you went there to feast your eyes with all those pretty things, it is quite clear you are not over particular; and as variety is charming and you have had a Prince for your lover, perhaps now you won't object to accept Mr. Daniel Coffin in the same capacity?"

Stupified with dread horror, Ernestina stood gazing in speechless vacuity upon that man who dared to address her in this language. But did her ears deceive her?—was it a chimera of the brain?—or could it be really true, that this loathsome wretch—this hideous monster—could imagine for a moment that she, the high-born, tenderly nurtured, fastidiously reared lady of rank, should abandon herself to the embraces of such a revolting animal?

Good heavens! could it indeed be possible? Yes—as she gazed upon that ruffian, his looks—his manner—all demonstrated that his fearful words had indeed expressed the still more appalling purposes of his soul: and with a low moan of ineffable anguish, Ernestina staggered back a few paces and sank upon a seat.

"Come, come," said the Hangman, impatiently, "I really can't understand you ladies of fashion a bit. You don't mind employing a man like me to do all your dirty work—dig a hole in your garden by night to bury a dead body—gammon a husband with hopes that are never to be fulfilled so as to send him to the scaffold——"

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Ernestina, once more starting from her seat, and this time in a positive agony of fearful excitement—for a flame was diffused throughout her entire being, molten lead appeared to be coursing through her veins, and the very chords of her brain seemed to be strung to the extremest verge of tension. "Monster—fiend—devil—I will no longer endure this constant persecution at your hands!"

"What is the use of calling me names," interrupted the Hangman, with a savage growl, though his looks still burnt with a fierce desire. "I tell you again that it is your own fault that I am now talking to you in this way. Seeing you in that gallery, in the midst of all those figures and pictures, put queer notions into my head, and as I watched you from behind the curtain where I was concealed, I thought to myself that after all you are one of the handsomest ladies I ever saw in my life. So I came to a certain resolution; and after the scene that took place just now, instead of leaving the house, I thought to myself that if I could only find your ladyship's chamber, I might make myself happy and comfortable there for the rest of the night. So I crept up stairs to this floor; and as the door of this very room stood open, I peeped in. That glance was enough. By the mere look of the room, the nick-nacks on the dressing-table, the mourning dresses hanging up in that clothes-press there that stands open—all these things told me in an instant that this was your ladyship's chamber. So here I am—and here I mean to remain till daylight."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, Ernestina interrupted him not, because she was revolving a thousand different and wildly impossible schemes in her mind. To pretend to yield to his humour and poison him—or to procure a knife and stab him to the heart—or else to fetch a pistol from her uncle's room and shoot him through the head—or, again, to alarm the house and have him

thrust forth at any risk,—these were some of the projects which entered her imagination, but which were discarded one after the other as soon as conceived. Thus, by the time he had ceased speaking, she had decided upon nothing, but was plunged in still more painful bewilderment, terror, and dismay than at first.

"You cannot be serious in what you say?" she suddenly cried, in a fit of desperation. "Tell me what will satisfy you—what sum do you require? Name the amount, and it shall be your's. Come with me to my uncle's chamber, and he will at once satisfy you on that score."

"It is not gold that I want just at this moment," said the Hangman, doggedly. "I have made two hundred guineas to-day from Sir Douglas Huntingdon—and six days hence I am to have five hundred more from the Prince Regent—which, by the bye, you yourself are to bring me——"

"I! what mean you?" exclaimed Ernestina, in amazement.

"Oh! it is all cut and dried between me and the Prince," returned the Hangman. "I honoured his Royal Highness with my noble presence at his crib—I mean Carlton House—yesterday; and we had a cozie chat together. I told him that I did not want to be made a Marquis, or a Duke, or an Earl, or any nonsense of that sort; but what I wanted was coin—blunt—cash—rhino!"

"Well—what next?" inquired Ernestina.

"The Prince promised that I should have five hundred guineas in a week—that is to say, next Wednesday night, at eleven o'clock, in the middle recess of Westminster Bridge on the left hand side going over, your ladyship is to put into my hands the sum named——"

"But what on earth made the Prince fix upon me?" demanded Ernestina, all her thoughts now turned into another channel.

"Oh! simply because he said that as you was interested in the matter, you ought to take a part in it. But it is possible, you knew that the Prince

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may think better of it and send somebody else instead of your ladyship. It don't matter to me who it is, so long as some one keeps the appointment and brings the money."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, a thought which had suddenly sprung vaguely up in Ernestina's mind, rapidly expanded into a tangible consistency; and by the time he had concluded, it had settled down into a stern and inflexible resolution.

"The Prince, you say, intends me to become the bearer of a large sum of money for you next Wednesday night?"—and as she spoke, she assumed an air of comparative indifference.

"Yes—I have already told you so," returned the Hangman. "Middle recess—Westminster Bridge—next Wednesday night—at eleven o'clock—punctual to the instant—that's the appointment!"

"And you will be there?" said Ernestina, with a rapid sidelong glance at the man.

"Yes — trust me for that!" he answered. "I should think so, when five hundred guineas are to be got!"

"You will be there in person?" repeated Ernestina, evidently with a deepening pre-occupation of thought: "and you will not send anybody else?"

"No—not I!" ejaculated Daniel Coffin. "But, why are you putting all these questions?"

"Because — because," faltered Ernestina, the blood again rushing to her cheeks and then leaving them pale as death once more, so that it was evident she was swayed by some powerful emotion—or else perhaps by the sudden apprehension that the resolution which had ere now settled in her mind was suspected by the Hangman.

"Because what?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Because," she repeated, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and now speaking with apparent earnestness and without hesitation,—"because if we are to meet that night, in the way you have described, you can in mercy accord me a delay until *then*—so that I may bring my mind to reflect with less aversion upon the sacrifice you demand."

"Ah!" ejaculated Coffin: "I understand your ladyship's tricks! You think to induce me to leave you now—and then you will trust either to the chapter of accidents or to the cooling down of my desires to save you from what I am now seeking? But I don't mean to be trifled with in this manner. Mine you shall be to-night—by fair means if you will—if not, by foul——"

And as he thus spoke, Daniel Coffin advanced towards Ernestina, his eyes flaming with lascivious passion.

"Stand back!" she cried, suddenly armed with the courage of despair. "I cannot—I will not submit to you this night. The demand is so sudden—so overwhelming—and then, I have suffered too so much anguish from other causes——But I swear — most solemnly, sacredly swear—that if you will only grant me the delay until that night when we shall meet on Westminster Bridge——"

"No!" exclaimed the Hangman; "not a day—not an hour—not a minute!"

"Then, by heaven!" cried Ernestina, darting to the bell-pull and seizing it in her hand; "I will not submit this night!"

There was something so resolute in her manner—wild and frenzied though it were—that Daniel Coffin was staggered; and it struck him that in the whirl of her agitated feelings she might alarm the whole house, thereby occasioning an exposure equally unprofitable and dangerous to them both. He accordingly began to cool down somewhat in his desires; and feeling the necessity of consenting to a compromise, he nevertheless, with characteristic greed, resolved that it should be one based upon immediate advantage to himself.

"Come—what will you give me to agree to your proposal?" he said, with a tone and manner full of sullen menace.

"There is my purse," replied Ernestina, still retaining her grasp upon the bell-rope with one hand and pointing with the other towards the toilette-table; "and you will find a few jewels in that box. Take them all—everything you fancy—and then leave me."

"But what security have I got," growled the Hangman, "that you will prove more condescending when we meet next Wednesday night?"

"Shall I not be as much in your power then," asked the lady, "as I am now? The relative circumstances of our position will not be changed: you can still threaten me—still coerce—still intimidate me;—but by that time I shall have brought my mind to view the thing with less horror, less aversion, and less disgust."

"Well—be it so," said the Hangman. "And now mind me—that when we meet next Wednesday night, I stand no more nonsense; but you shall go with me to some place where we can be comfortable together——"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Ernestina, her soul revolting from his words and looks down to its utter profundities. "I swear most solemnly — most sacredly—that I will do as you desire. But once more, I insist that you leave me now!"

"Well, well, I shan't stay much longer," rejoined Coffin, savagely: then advancing to the toilette-table, he helped himself to the purse and the jewels.

Having secured these spoils about his person, the ruffian unlocked the door—flung a parting look of deep and menacing meaning upon Ernestina, warning her not to forget her pledge—and then stole forth from the chamber. The lady retained her hold upon the bell-pull for nearly a minute: then, feeling satisfied that the dreadful man had indeed taken his departure, she hastened to re-lock the door — remaining alone, no longer with the excitement of bewildering thoughts, but in the cold, deep, immovable sternness of that resolve to which she had come.

CHAPTER CVII.

ST. JAMES'S PALACE.

In one of the earlier chapters of this work we have described Florence Eaton. About nineteen years of age — invested with a Madonna-like beauty, the innocence of which surrounded her as with a celestial halo—possessing a complexion of the purest white, dazzlingly transparent, and with the gentlest tint of the rose-leaf upon her cheeks—she was a being to whom the epithet of *angelic* may be applied. Her hair, of the lightest brown tinged with a golden hue, and seeming in the sunbeams to be of that precious shade which belongs to the silk when

gathered fresh from the silkworm, was worn in a profusion of ringlets falling upon her bright and polished shoulders. The tranquil lustre as well as the hue of heaven was in her eyes of soft azure: no coral was brighter than her lips;—no Grecian statue was ever chiselled with a more classical precision than that which marked her exquisite profile.

Then her shape—we have already described it as that of the sylph, blending perfection of symmetry with grace and elegance of carriage. The beautiful arching of the neck was of swan-like curvature: the bust, gently developed, was perfect in its virgin contours;—and as she walked, her form exhibited all the willowy elasticity of girlhood.

Gay and happy in her artless innocence was this charming creature: and in her liveliest moments her laugh came gushing forth so merrily melodious, that it seemed as if the teeth appearing between the parting coral of the lips, were themselves strings of musical pearls. Guile and deception were unknown to her: she was as ignorant of the duplicities, the falsities, and the artificialities of the world as the bird of paradise in its own genial clime is ignorant of the hail, the frost, the snow, and the ice of the hyperborean regions to the northward of inhospitable Labrador.

It may have chanced that the reader, while roving in a garden during the warm months when nature puts forth all the brightest and the best of her floral decorations, has observed a beautiful lily timidly revealing its virgin purity in the midst of all the most flaunting and gaudy occupants of the glowing parterres. That chaste and stainless lily seemed as it were out of place, unless for the purpose of contrast, by the side of full-blown peonies blushing their deepest red—groups of tulips displaying their variegated hues in all the pomp of their gaudy glory—the pinks drooping on their slender stalks—the marigolds vying with the bright yellow of the sun—the red roses expanding in all the pride belonging to Flora's cherished favourites—the glaring wall-flowers bright with their mingling yellow, warm sienna, and rich brown tints—the bluebells deep as the indigo seen in the hyacinth of India's plains—and all the other ornaments of the garden that force themselves most obtrusively upon the gaze. The eye, therefore, when contemplating such a scene, and when intoxicated with the blaze of beauty belonging to all that floral pomp, has settled at last with a feeling of relief and with a touching interest upon that fair, chaste, and modest lily appearing in the midst of such overwhelming gaud and grandeur. Apply this illustration to the world of fashion; and if amidst the brilliant galaxy of splendid Duchesses, exquisite Marchionesses, superb Countesses, and magnificent ladies of all grades and degrees of aristocratic rank, you behold one charming, retiring, and unsophisticated girl scarcely conscious of her own beauty, and calculated to please and interest the eye—not to dazzle and overwhelm the senses,—then have you found your lily amongst your flaunting, gaudy pageantry of flowers. And such was Florence Eaton!

Four or five days had elapsed after the incidents contained in the few last chapters; and it was about noon, when Lady Florimel said to her niece, "My dear Florence, I think that I have a little treat in store for you to-day."

"What is it, my dear aunt?" inquired the beauteous girl, gazing up with a smiling countenance from the embroidery in which she was engaged.

"You know, my dear girl," replied Pauline, "that her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia was here a few days ago, and likewise again yesterday. Amongst other things the Princess said to me, was that if ever you should feel inclined to visit the State Apartments at St. James's Palace ——"

"Oh! indeed I should be delighted," exclaimed Florence: "for inasmuch as you have an objection to attending the levees which the Prince of Wales sometimes holds there, and as you do not wish me to be presented at Court, I shall have no opportunity of seeing those superb apartments unless privately as you propose."

"And do you wish to be presented at Court?" asked Lady Florimel, gazing earnestly and not without some little feeling of uneasiness upon her lovely niece.

"Oh! no," exclaimed the artless girl, her silver voice as expressive of sincerity as were her innocent looks. "You have taught me to regard all regal splendour and princely show as being not only valueless, but also inconsistent with the true spirit of the age; and I can assure you, my dear aunt, that I am not faithless to your admirable teachings."

"Then you are my own dear girl!" said Pauline, infinitely relieved by this answer. "But to return to what we were ere now saying, I propose to take you at once to St. James's Palace, to pass an hour with the Princess and visit the State Apartments. Hasten and achieve your toilette—the carriage is ordered for half-past twelve."

"And do not you mean to accompany us, my dear uncle?" asked Florence, approaching Lord Florimel, who was seated on the sofa reading the newspaper.

"No, dear Florence," he replied, with a smile. "The Princess has invited you ladies in so cordial and friendly a manner, that the presence of one of the sterner sex would be a constraint upon the interesting *coteris*. And therefore I am excluded."

Florence, satisfied with this answer, hastened away to her own apartment to prepare for the visit and the moment she had quitted the drawing-room, Pauline said to her husband, "Do you not think, Gabriel, that you had better accompany us after all?"

"If you wish it, my dear Pauline," was the reply, as the nobleman gazed affectionately upon his handsome wife. "But I think that I have already convinced you it would be more becoming for yourself to accompany Florence alone. In that cold reserve which you may exhibit towards the Prince, Florence will see naught save the distant respect which a lady would naturally show in the presence of his Royal Highness. But were I to find myself in the company of the Prince, I could scarcely manifest even the most ordinary politeness. For though years and years have passed since the date of poor Octavia's wrongs, and also of the base outrages which he dared—though so fruitlessly—attempt towards yourself, yet is the memory of them immortal with me! All things considered, therefore, you would do well to go alone with Florence. Besides, you say that although the Princess Sophia will not be present at the interview, yet she

nas promised that the Master of her Household shall attend upon you——"

"Oh! it was not through any fear that I proposed you should accompany us," exclaimed Pauline. "Even were his Royal Highness inclined to renew towards me, either by word or look, the insults of bygone times, the presence of his daughter would assuredly prove an adequate check. Or else," added Pauline in a more serious tone, "must he indeed be far, far more depraved than we even know him to be."

Lady Florimel now retired to perform the little requisites of her own toilette, and at half-past twelve her ladyship and Florence stepped into the carriage. In a few minutes they were set down at St. James's Palace—that dingy, rambling, ignoble-looking old brick building the exterior of which has the appearance of a tumbling-down barrack, but upon whose interior hundreds and thousands of pounds have been expended to minister to the extravagance, the pomp, and the parade of Royalty. Poor unfortunate working classes! how have ye been doomed to the most crushing toil in order to furnish forth the splendour of those palaces which exist as the trophies of that tyranny which has achieved your wretchedness and slavery!

On alighting at St. James's Palace, Lady Florimel and the Honourable Miss Eaton were received by Sir Robert Conway, the Master of the Princess Sophia's Household. This gentleman was about sixty years of age—of courtly appearance—and one who had spent all his life as a hanger-on of Royalty. He had passed through all those grades of aristocratic flunkeyism which belong to the hierarchy of Royal Households—having gradually risen from Page of the Back Stairs, through the various phases of Page of the Front Stairs, Silver Stick, Gold Stick, Groom of the Stole, and heaven knows what beside in the service of the King, until he settled down into the comfortable place which we now find him occupying about the person of the Princess Sophia.

Heavens! what annals of the Court were contained in this man's memory. All the cells of his brain were so many encyclopædias filled with Court anecdotes, intrigues, scandals, depravities, and scoundrelisms. How many villanies amongst proud nobles had he been the means of hushing up!—how many frailties on the part of high-born ladies had he been instrumental in veiling from the public eye! How many noble lords had he known who were the most ignoble rascals on the face of God's earth!—how many Maids of Honour had he seen in his time who were no maids at all!—how many gentlemen of the bed-chamber had he been acquainted with, whose private deeds were so ungentlemanly that even at Crockford's den of infamy they were scouted as blacklegs!—how many Ladies-in-Waiting had he known who were so unladylike as to prefer their husbands' grooms to their husbands themselves!—how many Royal Highnesses had he bowed to, who by their conduct deserved to have been styled Royal Basenesses!

Then, was he not also—this Sir Robert Conway—a veritable perambulating *Court Guide*—a peripatetic *Blue Book* of the Aristocracy? He knew everybody and everything in the spheres of the Court, High Life, and Fashion. Did anybody happen to say in his presence, "By the by, who did Lord Cranbury marry?"—he would immediately have the answer ready to fall from the tip of his tongue, to the effect, for example's sake, that "the Right Honourable Augustus Octavius Stanhope St. James, sixth Earl of Cranbury, married the Honourable Miranda Amelia Jacintha Constantina Arlington, third daughter of Fitz-allan Seymour Portman Aulet, third Baron Rochdale, who married Lady Eliza Alexandrina Catherina Marietta Berkeley." In all other Court and Aristocratic matters, even to the minutest details of pedigree and genealogy, was this Master of the Household equally well versed and precise: and for this reason he was considered in the highest circles to be one of the cleverest men in all England. Indeed, a professor of a hundred different languages, half-a-dozen sciences, and as many arts, would not have obtained half the repute for talent and learning that was enjoyed by this wretched humdrum on the strength of the most trumpery, worthless, and debasing kind of knowledge to which a man could possibly degrade his intellect.

This great personage it was who received Lady Florimel and Miss Florence Eaton as they alighted from their carriage at St. James's Palace; and he forthwith conducted them to a magnificent saloon belonging to the suite of apartments occupied by the Princess Sophia. On introducing the ladies into the presence of the Princess, Sir Robert Conway withdrew: and her Royal Highness received her visitants with the kindest cordiality. Luncheon was immediately served: and when it was over, the Princess said, "Now, my dear Lady Florimel, I will summon Sir Robert Conway to escort you and your sweet niece to the State Apartments: but as I myself am somewhat indisposed, I hope you will excuse me from accompanying you."

The Master of the Household was accordingly sent for; and he speedily made his appearance—all bowings and scrapings, smiles and willingness—to conduct the ladies whithersoever they chose. Accordingly, Lady Florimel and Florence accompanied him to the State Apartments, which we shall not pause to describe: much less shall we linger to chronicle one single word of all the encomia which Sir Robert Conway lavished upon every feature of those rooms. Suffice it to say that Florence, in the artless simplicity of her character and with that natural good taste which had been fostered by her aunt, was much disappointed at finding far more of gingerbread tinsel than of sterling decorations, and much more gilding and gaudiness than works of art and masterpieces of the limner's pencil.

Having finished the inspection of the State Apartments, Sir Robert Conway, who had already received his cue from the Princess Sophia, proposed to introduce the ladies to an apartment well known as the King's Closet. This room was the one where the British Sovereigns were wont to transact private business on the occasion of Levees, Drawing Rooms, &c., held at St. James's Palace; and in that apartment many of the most diabolical laws and decrees have at different times received the royal signature.

Into this room did the Master of the Household now conduct Lady Florimel and Florence Eaton.

Pauline, who knew what was to happen, had some difficulty in concealing a certain amount of agitation and excitement which arose from the prospect of the interview that was now close at hand. As for Florence—totally unsuspecting whom she was about to meet, she followed her aunt in gay and cheerful confidence: but when Sir Robert Conway, on throwing open the door, exclaimed, "Good heavens! what have I done? the Prince Regent is here!"—the lovely girl trembled all over at the sudden idea of finding herself face to face with his Royal Highness. Oh! if she had only known—if she had only entertained the slightest scintillation of a suspicion that the Prince was in reality her father—the author of her being,—how different would have been her emotions, how far more solemnly and pathetically interesting this hour of her life!

As a matter of course, Sir Robert Conway affected to be overwhelmed with confusion in observing the Prince Regent in the Royal Closet: Pauline likewise stepped back a few paces, but with a really natural recoil from the destroyer of her sister, and not with any affected surprise or alarm—while her young, timid, and beautiful niece clung to her arm in vague terror lest this intrusion on their part should be visited by some unpleasant remonstrance.

The Prince, who as a matter of course through prearrangement had been located in the Royal Closet, now stepped forward, and with that easy yet elegant assurance which characterized him, at once exclaimed, "Do not be alarmed, my dear Conway! I presume you have brought these ladies hither to view the apartment: and they shall not be disappointed."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the courtly Conway, with a low bow, "Lady Florimel and her niece the Honourable Miss Eaton will present their duty to your Royal Highness."

Pauline bowed with a matron's dignity, accompanied by a due amount of respectful courtesy; and Florence, recovering her presence of mind at the reassuring words of the Prince, made a graceful salutation. This homage on the part of the ladies was acknowledged by what the Court newsman would call "the most gracious condescension" on the part of the Prince. At the same he flung upon Pauline a look which seemed to say, "I hope there is no longer any ill-feeling between us:" and then his eyes settled upon his lovely, angelic, blushing daughter—that daughter who knew not that she thus stood in her father's presence! But at the same moment—as he beheld that heavenly creature whose charms so far transcended all the representations which rumour had wafted to his ears, and on whose pure and candid brow chastity sate enthroned in alabaster, while vestal innocence beamed in her azure eyes as the sunlight shines in the clear blue of heaven,—as the Prince, we say, thus gazed upon that sweet ethereal creature, he experienced the father's pride—the parent's joy;—and in a moment of uncontrollable and ineffable feeling, he drew forth a small case enclosing the miniature of Octavia—the injured, wronged, and perished mother of that lovely girl!

Florence surveyed the Prince with the utmost surprise as she witnessed this proceeding; and Pauline, instantly stepping a pace backward, so as to get behind Florence, made a rapid and impatient sign to the Prince to warn him of the imprudence of his conduct and chide him for this demonstration of feeling which under the circumstances he ought to have avoided. As for Sir Robert Conway, he stood drawn up in an attitude of attention—but, courtier-like and also child-like, prepared to hear, see, and say nothing.

Perhaps it was one of the few fine moments of the Prince's life, when he thus became suddenly pliant and ductile to the influence of a father's feelings, and forgetting the necessity of caution, acknowledged the spontaneous sway of nature over the colder sentiment of prudence. It was one of the very few pathetic chapters in his history: and even Pauline, while signalling him to beware what he did, could not help thinking to herself, "This is at least some atonement made to the memory of my deceased sister!"

Scarcely had the Prince yielded to that sudden and irresistible impulse which thus made him draw forth the miniature portrait of the long-dead Octavia, in order to compare it with the living beauty that was now in his presence,—when the amazed and even startled look which Florence fixed upon him reminded him of his imprudence, even before he observed the signs which Lady Florimel was making. No sooner, therefore, had he opened that case and glanced upon that miniature—no sooner indeed had his eyes travelled from the features of the mother as perpetuated by the limner's art, to those of the daughter brilliant with the animation of youthful life,—when he closed the case again; and returning it to his pocket, instantaneously took the hand of Florence, saying, "Pardon me, young lady—pardon me—but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more!"

Florence became overwhelmed with confusion—almost with dismay: for she felt that the Prince's hand trembled nervously as he held her own—and there was something so peculiar, so touching, so appealing at the moment in his looks, that she experienced the strangest and most unaccountable feeling springing up in her heart. It was as if all in a moment she became deeply interested in this Prince whom she had never seen before. But, Ah! little did she suspect that it was nature asserting its empire within her gentle bosom, and influencing her with those promptings that were so mysterious, so inscrutable, and so profound!

"Permit us to retire, sir," now interjected Lady Florimel, fearful that the scene might go to such a length as to excite suspicion in the mind of Florence and render some explanation indispensable for the purpose of allaying it.

"Lady Florimel," said the Prince, fixing his looks upon her in a peculiar manner, "I hope that your noble husband and yourself will some day favour the reception-rooms at Carlton House with your presence, and that you will be accompanied by your amiable niece?"

Pauline bowed, but gave no reply: then taking the hand of Florence, she whispered hastily, "Let us withdraw."

The young lady's thoughts were thrown into such confusion by the Prince's manner, the words he had addressed to her, and the emotions which they had suddenly conjured up, that she scarcely knew what she was doing: but mechanically making a graceful salutation, she suffered her aunt to lead her from the room. Sir Robert Conway followed; and when they reached the Princess

Sophia's apartment, Florence was so overcome by the powerful yet unaccountable agitation of her feelings, that she burst into tears. Lady Florimel threw a rapid glance upon the Princess, as much as to say, "Did I not prophecy some such result as this?"—and her Royal Highness shook her head to express her regret that she should have been the means of bringing about this interview between the father and the daughter.

"My dear girl," said Pauline, in the kindest and most soothing manner to Florence, "what afflicts you thus? what feeling causes these tears?"

"Pardon me, my dear aunt," murmured Florence, hastily wiping her eyes; "and intercede on my behalf that her Royal Highness shall forgive me this foolish conduct of mine in her presence. But I could not help it! Some feeling came over me, stronger than myself—a feeling for which I could not account at the time, and which I am still less able to explain now. It was a temporary weakness—a transitory depression of spirits—produced, most probably, by that sudden excitement which seemed to take possession of his Royal Highness the Prince. But I feel better now: indeed I am quite recovered—and again do I implore your pardon."

"You have not offended us, my dear girl," said the Princess Sophia, rising from her seat and taking the young maiden's hand in the kindest manner.

To be brief, Florence Eaton speedily recovered her wonted cheerfulness; and in a short time a footman entered to announce that the carriage had arrived. Lady Florimel and her niece resumed their bonnets and scarves, took leave of the Princess, and entered the carriage, which Pauline ordered to drive round Hyde Park ere returning home.

While proceeding to that fashionable lounge maintained by the people's money to enable the Aristocracy of London to display their gorgeous equipages and sumptuous apparel, Florence continued to discourse upon the singular incidents of the meeting in the Royal Closet. She expressed her pity for the Prince who had been so deeply moved at *having the features of a lost friend recalled to his memory;* and with a natural artlessness she observed that any one who could be so moved, must possess a very excellent disposition. Pauline was vexed to hear her talk in this manner: for she saw that the incident had made a deep impression upon the young maiden's mind, and she did not wish any occurrence to disturb the even tenour of that existence which had hitherto passed in such serene and tranquil happiness. Moreover, Pauline was naturally fearful of her niece obtaining any clue to the discovery of the secret of her birth: for sad—Oh! sad indeed would it be for this innocent unsophisticated child of nature to have her mind enlightened as to the past and be taught the history of a mother's shame!

The carriage had entered Hyde Park; and Lady Florimel was thinking how she should turn the conversation into another channel, when suddenly loud cries of alarm burst from the lips of several persons walking on the footways on either side of the road; and at the same instant the coachman reined in his horses abruptly. But a crash simultaneously occurred: fresh ejaculations of terror were heard—the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage were plunging violently—and several people were rushing to the spot. Pauline and Florence, greatly affrighted, looked forth from the windows; and the cause of the stoppage, confusion, and alarming cries was immediately apparent. A gentleman driving a magnificent horse in a gig, had found the animal all in a moment become unmanageable, shying at a white pocket handkerchief which somebody had let fall and which was blowing across the road. Thus suddenly swerving aside, the spirited steed had come in furious collision with the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage. The gig was upset—the gentleman was thrown out and either killed upon the spot, or stunned—and the maddened animal dashed away fleet as an arrow, dragging the vehicle like a thing of no weight behind him.

Such was the incident which occurred all in a moment to turn the thoughts alike of Pauline and Florence into a new channel. The footman who stood behind the carriage, instantaneously leaped down and joined those persons who had rushed to the spot to render their assistance. The gentleman, on being raised from the ground, was discovered to have been only stunned—not killed. The footman, stepping up to the carriage-window, reported this intelligence to Pauline, who at once directed that the gentleman should be lifted into the chariot. But who was he? No one on the spot at the moment knew him: it was therefore impossible to convey him to his own residence—and Pauline commanded the carriage to proceed home to Florimel House in Piccadilly.

A few minutes brought the equipage thither; and the gentleman, who still remained insensible, was lifted into the mansion—conveyed to a chamber—and surrounded by all possible attentions. Medical aid was procured; and in a short time the sufferer was somewhat restored to consciousness—but not sufficiently to speak: and the physicians, while declaring that no fatal result need be dreaded, nevertheless desired that he should be kept perfectly tranquil, as he had evidently received a severe shock from the fall.

When the first excitement attending this incident had somewhat subsided, Lord Florimel bethought himself of searching the stranger's pockets for the purpose of ascertaining, if possible, who he was—as his relations or friends might be uneasy at his absence. His card-case was found: and thence was it discovered that the handsome young invalid—for both good-looking and youthful he assuredly was, as we might have observed before—was Mr. Malvern of Hanover Square.

CHAPTER CVIII.

THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE.

Scarcely had Lady Florimel's carriage rolled out of the court-yard of St. James's Palace, when another equipage, drawn by four horses, dashed into the enclosure. The royal arms were upon the panels of this magnificent barouche: the postilions were clad in elegant jockey-attire of sky-blue; and three tall footmen in the royal liveries stood behind the carriage.

The moment this equipage appeared, great excitement immediately became visible amongst all

the officials, lacqueys, and dependants who had previously been lounging about in the court-yard and entrance-hall of the palace. But now two lines of bowing individuals were speedily formed from the carriage-door to the entrance of the building; and Sir Robert Conway, who came hurrying forward, arrived just in time to assist a young lady to alight. Then, with profound respect and veneration, the old courtier offered this young lady his arm, which she took with unaffected ease and affability of manner,—acknowledging with a graceful inclination of her head the low bows made by the two lines of dependants, as she passed between them into the palace. Three ladies-in-waiting likewise descended from the carriage and followed close behind their youthful mistress: for this young lady who has just arrived at St. James's Palace, and whom we now for the first time introduce to our readers, is the Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent and the injured Caroline of Brunswick!

Strange coincidence! that on the same day, at the same hour, and within a few minutes of each other, the illegitimate daughter of the Prince Regent—namely, Florence Eaton—and his legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, should thus visit St. James's Palace!

And here we must pause for a little space to describe her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte, who was now just eighteen years of age. Handsome she was, assuredly,—yet not endowed with that sweet, nymph-like, and angelic beauty which characterized Florence Eaton; but invested with that peculiar style of loveliness—sleepy, luxuriant, and sensuous—which has already been described in an earlier chapter as distinctive of the females belonging to the family of Guelph. Her figure, even at this early age, was already of a richness merging upon embonpoint—but not sufficiently so to diminish its graces. There was however a voluptuousness in its contours which was enhanced by the complete exposure of the shoulders and neck, according to the fashion of the time. Short of stature, the Princess had little of girlhood's suppleness and lightness of movement: her slow pace and matron-like gait arose not from any idea of maintaining a dignified bearing, but from the circumstance that in her nature she was what Byron has described as "somewhat languishing and lazy."

Her hair—of a light chestnut, soft as silk and fine in its individual filaments—was far from profuse in quantity, and was worn in frizzly ringlets at the sides, but carelessly gathered up in a knot behind the head. Her complexion was beautifully fair, with an animated bloom upon the cheeks, making them resemble in their healthful plumpness the ripe peach with its mingled damask and vermeil. Her features could not be called regular nor yet classical; and they were also too large and striking for a delicate beauty—the nose being prominent, the lips full and sensuous,—and the chin rounded with the boldness belonging to a profile that indicates strong passions. Her eyes were of a light blue, and looked soft, languishing, and even wanton from beneath their drooping lids: the eyebrows were light, and indeed too delicately pencilled to give a classic finish to the opal of the temples.

To judge more minutely still of the character of the Princess Charlotte from the usual physical indications, we may add that benevolence, generosity, and goodness of heart were in her looks: while an occasional bridling up of the head, a quick flashing of the eye from the midst of its languid expression, and a sudden flushing of the countenance, showed that she possessed a temper impatient of contradiction and which in time might even become overbearing and despotic.

We have said that her Royal Highness was attired in a very low dress: but as a matter of course it was not with her shoulders and bosom thus exposed that she had arrived in the carriage. An elegant scarf was thrown lightly over her neck; and a veil depended from the hat which she wore. This hat was of beaver, with large brims and black plumes; and being worn gracefully, it suited well the somewhat bold and masculine style of her features.

On reaching the landing that communicated with the apartments of the Princess Sophia, the Princess Charlotte quitted the arm of Sir Robert Conway, and passed into a dressing-room, followed by her ladies-in-waiting. There she laid aside her splendid hat and her elegant scarf of purple velvet with its gold fringe; and dispensing with the attendance of her ladies, she proceeded alone to the apartment where the Princess Sophia was seated. The meeting between the aunt and the niece was most affectionate; and when they had exchanged the usual greetings, the Princess Charlotte requested Sophia to dismiss her ladies who were in attendance. This was immediately done; and the royal aunt and niece remained alone together.

We must here observe that for some years past the Princess Charlotte had not resided with her father the Prince Regent: she dwelt principally with the King and Queen at Windsor or Frogmore. That is to say, she was in reality under the protection of old Queen Charlotte, his Majesty George III being at the time a hopeless lunatic. The young Princess did not often repair to London, save when in the company of the Queen: but occasionally she would make a special trip to St. James's Palace, to visit her aunts who had apartments there; and it was often observed in courtly circles, rumoured throughout the West End, and even hinted at times by the newspaper-press, that on such occasions her Royal Highness very seldom called at Carlton House, but saw her father the Prince Regent at St. James's. We may add that of all the Royal Family the Princess Sophia was Charlotte's favourite relative; and to this much-loved aunt was she wont to confide all her cares, anxieties, and troubles.

Not many days had elapsed since the Princess Charlotte had paid Sophia one of these flying visits to which we have alluded: and therefore her appearance at St. James's after so brief an interval, and the request which she now made for the dismissal of the waiting-ladies from the room—added to a certain pre-occupation which was visible in her manner—convinced Sophia that something unpleasant had occurred.

"My dear Charlotte," accordingly said the aunt, the moment her ladies had quitted the apartment; "has any thing happened to cause you fresh uneasiness?"

"Oh! my dear aunt," exclaimed the young Princess, bursting into tears; "how can I tell you what has

occurred? how can I wound your heart so deeply as to speak ill of that mother whom I know you love so fondly?"

"Tell me everything, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia; "and do not regard my feelings at all. Tell me what has happened! You know that I would do anything to serve you. But come, dry these tears! Should any one enter unexpectedly and see you weeping——"

"Oh! let me weep—let me weep, my dear aunt!" cried the Princess Charlotte, now literally wringing her hands in anguish. "These tears afford a vent for that sorrow which would otherwise cause my heart to burst. For, Oh! this pent-up affliction which circumstances so often compel me to restrain, seems at times to become a consuming flame and to prey upon my very vitals——"

"Heavens! dear Charlotte," cried the Princess Sophia, now very seriously alarmed: "I know that you grieve on account of your mother—but never, never have I heard you speak so despondingly as at present! Surely, surely something terrible has happened——"

"Yes—something terrible indeed!" interrupted the Princess: "something of so grave and so serious a nature that I question whether I shall ever return to Windsor again—whether indeed I shall not steal out of England in disguise, and hasten to join my poor dear persecuted mother in Italy!"

"For God's sake, compose yourself, dearest Charlotte!" said the Princess Sophia, in the most soothing manner possible. "Instead of giving way to this painful excitement, tell me what has occurred—favour me with your confidence, as you have hitherto been wont to do—allow me to give you my advice, and promise me that you will follow it."

"But how will you advise me against your own mother?" exclaimed the young Princess impetuously.

"If my mother be acting wrongly," was the mild and gently remonstrative answer, "I will not scruple to condemn her proceedings as candidly and impartially as I would those of an utter stranger. Far more readily, then, would I protect *you*, my beloved niece, against even the machinations of my own mother—if such machinations were in progress!"

"Pardon me—pardon me, dearest aunt!" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with a gush of fervid feeling and grateful enthusiasm: "pardon me, I say, for having mistrusted you for a moment—but I felt at the time as if there were no longer any confidence to be bestowed on a single being upon earth!"

"Tell me, Charlotte," said the Princess Sophia, "what it is that has affected you so painfully—so profoundly."

"I will endeavour to restrain my feelings in such a manner," answered the young Princess, "as to enable me to give you a calm and intelligible narrative of what has occurred. You know that at Windsor Castle I have free access on all occasions to the Queen's private apartments, and that it is never considered necessary for me to send and announce my intention of visiting her Majesty in her own room. You are likewise aware that her Majesty is particularly fond at this time of the year, when the weather is so cold, of sitting in the little room which she calls *the boudoir*, and which has double doors. Well, at about eleven o'clock this forenoon I repaired as usual to pay my respects to her Majesty, forgetting to ask previously whether she was alone. On reaching the boudoir, I found the outer door ajar—and perhaps you remember how noiselessly it opens? Certain it is that when I opened it the sound could not have been heard inside the room; for the voices that were in conversation did not cease speaking. On hearing those voices, and recognizing one to be the Queen's, I was immediately on the point of retiring, under the impression that her Majesty was engaged, when something which fell from her lips suddenly transfixed me to the spot. The words were to this effect:—'*But, my dear Mrs. Owen, we have gone too far to retreat: the ruin of the Princess Caroline is resolved upon; it must be accomplished—and I am determined that she shall never, never have a chance of being Queen of England.*'—Oh! as these dreadful syllables met mine ears, a cold tremor seized upon me—I shivered violently from head to foot, and should have fallen had I not actually clung to the door-post for support. Then with a mighty effort I so far conquered my emotions as to remain an eager, breathless listener. It was now Mrs. Owen—a name I had sometimes heard before—who spoke. '*I am well aware,*' she said, '*of the truth of your Majesty's observation, that we have gone much too far to retreat: but what I dread is exposure—and this alarm I entertain not merely for my own sake, but that of every one implicated in the business. That meddling young man's escape from the agents of the French Prefect——*' Here the Queen interrupted Mrs. Owen, exclaiming, '*You are sure that the intelligence is correct?*'—'*Beyond all possibility of doubt,*' replied Mrs. Owen: '*here is the letter which the Prefect of Police in Paris has written to the Marquis of Leveson acquainting him with all that is known of the rescue and escape.*'—Then as I still remained spellbound at the threshold of the boudoir, I could hear the rustling of a paper, as of a letter being opened; and then a pause ensued in the conversation, so that I felt assured the Queen was reading the letter which Mrs. Owen appeared to have put into her hands. Wherefore did I not fly from that spot? Oh! cannot you comprehend the terrible nature of that curiosity which thus retained me there? And now I was shivering with a chill no longer, but trembling with a burning fever; for the blood was pouring like molten lead through my veins. Eagerly, intensely did I listen to catch the next words that might be uttered. At length the Queen spoke again. She had evidently finished the perusal of the letter. '*Who could have been the authors of that rescue?*' she said, in the quick, sharp, querulous tone which she adopts when labouring under apprehension or annoyance. '*You see,*' she continued, '*it is quite clear from the report made by the police agents to the Prefect, that the plot must have been deeply laid, and that they were Englishmen who accomplished the rescue. Who could they have been?*'—'*That is the mystery, and likewise the source of alarm,*' observed Mrs. Owen. '*Certain it is that there are now several people who are acquainted with the whole plot which we have been conducting for years past: for of course the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus did not fail to tell everything to his friends after his rescue, even if they did not know all particulars before.*'—'*Which was most probable,*' added the

Queen, in a still more bitter tone of vexation: '*or else how could they have known he was a prisoner under such circumstances? and wherefore should they have attempted to rescue him? What can have become of him?*'—Mrs. Owen, in reply, proceeded to remind the Queen that this young man whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, residing at Canterbury; and it appears also from what Mrs. Owen said, that her youngest daughter—Mary by name—is staying with that same Miss Stanley. '*I have allowed Mary,*' observed Mrs. Owen, '*to remain there unmolested, because she is buried in a seclusion where she has no opportunity of revealing our secrets in a manner calculated to do us any more harm than she has already done.*' Mrs. Owen likewise proceeded to observe that she hated her youngest daughter and should never again be able to bear the sight of her, '*because she had proved so disobedient.*' But heavens! my dear aunt, in what think you that this disobedience consisted?"

"I know not, my dear Charlotte," returned the Princess Sophia, who had listened with a profoundly mournful interest to the preceding narrative. "Pray continue: this is indeed a dreadful recital!"

"Dreadful!" echoed the Princess Charlotte, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes and assuming a forced composure. "From the conversation which ensued between Mrs. Owen and the Queen, I learnt that for years past a fearful conspiracy has been in existence—a conspiracy——My God! for what object?——Oh! to accomplish the ruin of my poor mother! In this conspiracy the Queen, three or four noblemen, several titled ladies, and this Mrs. Owen have been leagued: and what is worse—Oh! ten thousand times worse—my father the Prince Regent is deep in that same conspiracy against his own wife! Aye and

more too——Alas! my dear aunt that I should have to afflict you by these communications: but to *you* alone can I confide my sorrows—from *you* alone can I expect sympathy! I have named some of the conspirators: but in addition to the list, I must specify my two uncles, the Dukes of——"

And here the voice of the young Princess was lost in sobs as she murmured the two names.

"O heavens! this is terrible—terrible!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, clasping her hands.

"Now you can understand my sorrow, and you can sympathise with me!" said the unhappy young Princess Charlotte. "That I should be compelled thus to speak to you concerning your own mother and your brothers——"

"Is scarcely so dreadful," interrupted the Princess Sophia, "as for *you*, my dear niece, to have learnt so much evil of your own father! But pray proceed. Frightful as the narrative is, I am nevertheless impelled by a mournful interest to hear it all."

"I have already told you," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "that this conspiracy has been progressing for years. You are aware—of course you are—that in 1806 certain grave and serious charges were made against my poor mother. I was only ten years of age at the time, and was too young to know what was going on: but still I knew, even *then*, that my poor mother was unhappy—for when taken to see her at Blackheath, I noticed—child as I was—that she cried bitterly, very bitterly! You know, my dear aunt, that the charges made against her at the time of which I am speaking, all fell to the ground: not one could be maintained—they were the basest fabrications—the vilest inventions of calumny! This I have of course learnt only within the last few years: but it was reserved for this day's incident to reveal to me the astounding fact that those charges, made against my poor mother in 1806, resulted from the schemes of the conspirators whom I have named!"

"Oh! surely you must be labouring under some terrible misapprehension?" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, contemplating her niece in dismay.

"No: all that I am telling you did I glean from the discourse which took place between the Queen and Mrs. Owen this morning. But that is not all," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with another powerful and painful effort to subdue a passionate outburst of those feelings that were struggling to find a vent. "At this present moment Mrs. Owen's three eldest daughters are engaged in carrying out the schemes of the conspirators: and it is because the youngest daughter Mary recoiled in horror from the same detestable service when it was proposed to her—it is for this reason that she is hated by her mother, rendered homeless, and made dependent on the generosity of that Miss Louisa Stanley whose name I have already mentioned. Oh! you perceive, my dear aunt, that this morning has been fraught with terrible revelations for me! And can you wonder if I ere now expressed a doubt whether I would ever return to Windsor again—or whether I would not quit England, repair to Italy, and not only warn my beloved mother of the perils which surround her, but likewise remain with her henceforth to sooth and solace her?"

"No—you must not leave England, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia. "Such a course could only lead to a scandal and an exposure that might involve the whole Royal Family in utter ruin. You have sought my advice, and you shall have it: you shall have my best assistance also—but believe me, the utmost caution and circumspection must be used. Tell me however whether anything farther took place between Mrs. Owen and my mother this morning, and how their interview terminated."

"Mrs. Owen reminded her Majesty, as I just now said," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "of the circumstance that the young gentleman whom they spoke of as Jocelyn Loftus was engaged to be married to that Miss Louisa Stanley with whom Mary Owen is staying at Canterbury. Mrs. Owen therefore suggested that it was very probable Jocelyn Loftus, on his escape from the hands of the French authorities, would fly back to England and hasten to convince his beloved Louisa of his safety. That he would take this step instead of hurrying on to Italy, Mrs. Owen suggested as more than probable; and the Queen appeared to fall into the same view of the matter. They therefore buoyed themselves up with this hope: and from some farther remarks which they made, it seems as if they cared not if Jocelyn Loftus should content himself with merely writing a warning letter to my dear mother in Italy, inasmuch as my mother is so completely surrounded by the creatures and tools of the conspirators, that the correspondence addressed to her is subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, and all letters calculated to open her eyes to the dangers of her position, are carefully suppressed."

"I could not have believed my mother capable of such wickedness," said the Princess Sophia, terribly afflicted and profoundly humiliated at being thus compelled to listen to the recital of a parent's iniquities.

"'Tis, alas! all too true," observed the Princess Charlotte. "And, Oh!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, "how shall I ever be able to meet my father again, otherwise than to overwhelm him with reproaches for his conduct towards my mother? For observe, my dear aunt," she cried, suddenly wiping away her tears, and evidently deriving solace from the thought which had just struck her and to which she was about to give utterance,—"not once, throughout that long conversation which I overheard this morning, did either the Queen or Mrs. Owen venture to impute a single crime to my poor mother! On the contrary, it is because the conspirators know her to be virtuous that they are compelled to invent imputations against her and suborn perjurers to weave the meshes of circumstantial evidence around her, in order to consummate her ruin. The mere existence of this conspiracy, without even all the frightful details that have come to my knowledge, would be sufficient to prove my mother's innocence and virtue. Then wherefore is she thus persecuted? why have I been for years separated from her? At first, when I was a child, I was told that it was not consistent with my rank as lineal heiress to the throne to be brought up under my parents' care; and knowing no better, but believing what I was told, I repined not. But as I grew up, misgivings relative to the truth of those represen-

tations entered my mind; and as you are well aware, my dear aunt, I have for the last two or three years been much afflicted—much grieved—not only at being separated from both my parents, but also because they themselves are separated! You know," added the Princess Charlotte with the fervid eloquence of feelings deeply moved, "that such have been my griefs!"

"I know it, alas! too well," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, throwing her arms round the neck of her young and handsome niece. "I know it, my beloved Charlotte—for you have poured forth all your woes into my bosom, and I have done my best to console you!"

"Yes—you have been a dear fond relative to me," replied the royal niece, affectionately returning the aunt's caresses. "How often have you sustained my drooping spirit! and how valuable have been your lessons, in teaching me the necessity of assuming a demeanour calculated to prevent the giddy throng of rank and fashion from conjecturing how painful were the gnawings of affliction at my heart's core! But this is not the time and these are not the circumstances," she suddenly exclaimed, "for me to give way to grief. I must study how to act for the best—and you, my dear aunt, must counsel me."

"But you have not told me all that occurred in the Queen's boudoir?" remarked Sophia.

"Oh! these frequent interruptions which the gush of feeling occasions!" cried the Princess Charlotte. "The discourse between her Majesty and Mrs. Owen was long and serious—embracing so many points that it gave me the completest insight into the whole conspiracy. But they resolved upon nothing definite—unless it were to ascertain without delay whether the young gentleman whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, be really at Canterbury or not. At length Mrs. Owen rose to depart; and I fled away from the vicinage of the boudoir. Hastening to my own apartments, I ordered the carriage—dressed myself in a hurry—and came direct from Windsor to St. James's, to consult with you, my best friend and kindest relative!"

"I have already urged the absolute necessity of prudence and caution," said the Princess Sophia. "Unfortunately, my dear Charlotte, the monarchical institutions of this country are becoming unpopular with the great mass of the people. The establishment of a Republic in North America and the tremendous impulse given to liberal ideas by the French Revolution, have set the millions a-thinking in this country. The consequence is that Royalty is menaced on every side: its end is approaching—and those who are anxious to precipitate the catastrophe, rejoice in each new suicidal act which Royalty itself commits. Every crime, every vice, every frailty, every misdeed connected with Royalty that can be dragged forth by its enemies to the public eye, constitutes one of its suicidal acts and becomes a nail which it is knocking in its own coffin. It is not therefore for you, my dear Charlotte, to do aught to accelerate the ruin of that throne whereon you hope to sit: and hence the absolute necessity for caution — the utmost caution indeed, under present circumstances."

"But something must be done!" cried the young Princess, who had listened with the utmost impatience to her aunt's somewhat lengthened address. "I cannot suffer my poor mother to remain environed by these fearful perils. If I write to her a warning letter, it will be intercepted ——"

"An idea has struck me!" ejaculated the Princess Sophia. "It is evident that this Mr. Jocelyn Loftus is a generous-hearted, chivalrous young man—one who is resolved to become the champion of your mother against her enemies. Arguing from a knowledge of the human heart, it is indeed most probable that after his rescue from the French authorities, he has sped back to England to embrace his beloved Louisa and personally assure her of his safety. I will at all events write this very day to Canterbury ——"

"You will write to Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, eagerly and thankfully.

"Yes, I will write to him," resumed the royal aunt: "I will beseech him to come up to London at once and hold a conference with me—a conference at which you, my dear niece, shall be present;—and then we will settle some decisive plan for the protection of your dear mother against her enemies."

"Yes—this is the best course to pursue," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, again flinging herself into Sophia's arms and embracing her affectionately. "Alas! alas!" she continued, the tears once more streaming down her cheeks; "sad—very sad is my poor mother's destiny! You must know, my dear aunt, that although everybody observes such caution when speaking in my hearing, there are nevertheless times when I cannot help catching things which were never meant to reach me: and sometimes, too, I glean from newspapers such strange allegations and unmistakable allusions ——"

"Concerning whom, my dear girl?" demanded the Princess Sophia, anxiously.

"Concerning my own father, the Prince Regent of the Kingdom!" was the response, delivered with so profound a melancholy that it was evident the young Princess deeply felt the consciousness of her sire's profligacy. "I know many things which perhaps, at my age and in my position, I ought not to know," she continued. "I know, for instance, that during the long years which have elapsed since my father's separation from my mother, he has been leading a life which reflects no honour upon him as a parent, a husband, or a Prince. I know that many and many a titled dame belonging to the Royal Court, has been too intimate with him: and I know also that Lady Sackville is the present Royal Favourite at Carlton House, and that her will, if she choose to assert it, may not only become law there but also throughout the British empire. Can I wonder then, my dear aunt, to hear you tell me that Royalty is suffering in the estimation of the people of this country?"

"Would to heaven, my dear Charlotte," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, her own feelings now worked up to the most painful degree of excitement: for she felt—deeply, poignantly felt—that she herself was far from immaculate, and that the discovery of her dishonour had tended amongst other overwhelming misfortunes to render her own father, George III, a hopeless lunatic: "would to heaven that such topics as those to which you have alluded, had never been forced upon your thoughts! Oh! my dear niece, you are too young

—too good—to have such reflections thrust as it were upon your innocent contemplation——"

"Reflections which destroy all the innocence of the soul!" interrupted Charlotte bitterly. "Where is the generous confidence of my youthfulness? It is gone—gone—and never can be restored! Often do I think of those apples which grow upon the banks of the Dead Sea, and which though fair and beauteous to gaze upon, nevertheless contain naught but corruption and rottenness. May not the British Court be likened unto one of those deceptive fruits?—for, alas! my dear aunt, it is not concerning my father only that startling whispers have sometimes reached my ears and distressing allusions in the newspapers have met mine eyes, but there is scarcely a member of the Royal Family concerning whom I have not recently heard or read something calculated to shock or scare me!"

"Good heavens! what mean you, dear girl?" demanded the Princess Sophia, surveying her niece with terrified amazement: for knowing how many dreadful things might be told relative to her parents, her brothers, her sisters, and even herself, Sophia was naturally stricken with horrible suspense as to how much of all those fearful truths had come to the knowledge of her niece.

"Oh! wherefore should I annoy and distress you, my dear aunt, more than I have already done?" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, now evidently chagrined at having made her last observation.

"But you *must* tell me, my dear child, what you have heard or read," said the Princess Sophia, earnestly and even entreatingly: "because I will candidly tell you how much is true and how much is false, of all that rumour circulates or that scandal loves to repeat."

"Yes—it is better that I should know how to discriminate between the true and false," said the young Princess, evidently appreciating the justice of the remark. "Heaven knows that the Royal History is already clouded enough, without the necessity of wilful exaggeration! I have heard then, my dear aunt," she continued, partially averting her blushing countenance, "that my deceased aunt, your well-beloved sister the Princess Amelia, died heartbroken from a blighted and dishonouring love——"

"No, no—it is not true—it is not true!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia; but her very manner convinced her niece that the tale *was* indeed too true. "What else have you heard, Charlotte?" demanded the aunt abruptly.

"Dreadful things connected with my uncle Ernest, the Duke of Cumberland," responded the young Princess hesitatingly. "I overheard the other day the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott conversing together about uncle Ernest and his late valet Sellis——"

"Oh! but this is the vilest of scandals!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, starting as if galvanised. "Come, my dear girl—we must talk no more upon the subject—you must think no more of them——"

"I will endeavour to forget them," rejoined the Princess Charlotte: but having taken her leave of her aunt, she continued to ponder deeply and painfully upon all these matters during her ride back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER CIX.

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE.

It was the Wednesday fixed for the appointment with Daniel Coffin on Westminster-bridge; and shortly after dusk the Prince Regent, muffled closely in a capacious mantle, and with a hat the slouching brims of which completely shaded his countenance, issued from the private gate of Carlton Palace that opened into St. James's Park. Passing rapidly along the Mall, he at length relaxed his pace; and on arriving opposite St. James's Palace he walked very slowly, in the evident expectation of meeting some one. The evening was dull and misty, and very few people were in the park: but presently a figure, with an unmistakable gait, emerged as it were from the surrounding gloom, and accosted his Royal Highness.

"Ah! it is you," ejaculated the Prince. "You are punctual: it is barely five o'clock."

"Why, your Royal Highness," observed the Hangman, "when I received such a pressing, and I may say a peremptory message as your valet brought me to-day, it wasn't likely I should go and neglect it."

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince; "you must talk as little and listen as patiently as you can, for I have something of the greatest importance to say to you. But before I proceed, let me tell you that if I know how to reward liberally I am equally aware how to punish severely; so that your fidelity shall be nobly recompensed, but any treachery on your part shall be ruthlessly punished."

"I don't at all object to such terms," remarked Coffin: "because I am too wise not to earn the reward—and I am not such a fool as to risk the punishment."

"I like deeds and not words," said the Prince: "and if I have given you this warning, it has not been without a reason. Wherefore did you go to Lady Ernestina Dysart and tell her that it was my intention to make her the bearer of the money to be paid to you this night?"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Hangman: "her ladyship told you that? But what else did she tell your Royal Highness?"

"She told me nothing," replied the Prince, "but what I presume was the truth: namely, that you insinuated yourself into Leveson House—that you found your way to her private chamber—and that you made her a monstrous proposal which I dare not name."

"And was this all Lady Ernestina told you?" inquired the Hangman, the sardonic leer which he gave being visible even in the deepening gloom of the hour.

"Was not that enough?" exclaimed the Prince, astonished at the question: "or would you have me understand that Lady Ernestina actually succumbed to your wishes?"

"No—I didn't mean anything of the sort," interrupted the Hangman, now satisfied that Ernestina had *not* mentioned to the Prince a word relative to the other incidents which had occurred on the same night at Leveson House: not that he would have cared if she had been more communicative on the subject, but he was merely curious to ascertain the point.

"There is something peculiar in your manner," said the Prince: "as if you fancied that Lady Ernestina revealed to me less than she might have done."

"Well," observed the Hangman, carelessly, "I only thought perhaps she might have told your Royal Highness that I got a few guineas out of her, and one or two little articles of jewellery that she gave me——"

"Of that no matter," interrupted the Prince: "it is your disposition as well as your calling to lay your hand on whatever comes in your way. But to cut all this matter short, I merely mention the fact of Lady Ernestina's calling privately upon me and communicating the particulars of your visit to her, in order to show you by your own actions that you cannot always keep a secret or behave prudently."

"Well, I admit I was wrong," observed the Hangman, affecting a contrite tone: "but as your Royal Highness had so positively said you meant to employ Lady Ernestina to bring the money to me at eleven o'clock to-night on Westminster Bridge, I didn't think there was any harm in just mentioning the fact to her, and I certainly did not expect that she would peach to you again——"

"Well, once more I say," ejaculated the Prince, impetuously, "you must listen and not talk—and you must beware in future how you open your lips to breathe my name to a soul. I know your character well: money is your god—gold is your idol; and you care not what you do or what happens as long as your avarice is gratified. Is it not so?"

"Your Royal Highness isn't far wrong," answered the Hangman with a chuckle.

"I knew it," observed the Prince laconically. "And now, therefore, I am going this evening to tempt you with quantities of gold—indeed to line your pockets so effectually with the precious metal that, if I mistake not, you will be the happiest man in existence. In the first place, I give you at once the five hundred guineas which were to have been handed over to you to-night at eleven o'clock——"

"Ah! then that appointment is not to be kept?" ejaculated Coffin, as he clutched the heavy bag of chinking gold which the Prince gave him as he spoke.

"Listen and interrupt me not," continued his Royal Highness. "You have the five hundred guineas which I promised you: now I wish to know whether you will earn another five hundred by performing the service I am about to specify?"

"I'd hang my own mother for such a sum, if she was alive," answered Coffin, eagerly.

"Then if you would so willingly dispose of your parent," exclaimed the Prince, "you will have no objection to surrender up to the keeping of others a person who is now dwelling beneath your roof?"

"Who does your Royal Highness mean?" demanded Coffin.

"I mean the young man who passes by the name of the Foundling——"

"Ah! what, Jack? I thought from what I've lately heard that he belongs by rights to some great family. I was quite sure that Larry Sampson," continued the Hangman, "did not go up to Tagrarty's to make inquiries for nothing."

"Who or what the lad is you will never know," resumed the Prince, in a firm and decisive tone. "Be it sufficient for me to say that his mother is a lady who has enlisted my sympathies in her case; and I purpose to provide for the young man in a foreign country. Now, will you part with him by fair means?"

"To be sure—for the consideration named just now," answered the Hangman, readily.

"But in order to earn that other five hundred guineas," resumed the Prince, "you must do certain things to carry out the views which I entertain. In the first place, you must on some pretence or excuse cause the Foundling to be in the central recess on the left hand side of Westminster Bridge this night at eleven o'clock! In a word, he must keep the precise appointment which was originally made for *you*: and he must be left alone in that recess for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

"What the deuce can this be for?" exclaimed the Hangman. "I should not like any harm to befall the boy——"

"Harm — nonsense!" ejaculated the Prince: "none is intended. But as circumstances compel me thus to confide in you, I have no objection to state for your security and tranquillity, that the object of the boy's being left alone in the recess of the bridge this night for a brief period, is to enable one who feels deeply interested in him to have an opportunity of gazing for once upon his countenance. Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly—and it shall be done," replied the Hangman. "What next?"

"The moment you have left the Foundling in the recess," continued the Regent, "you will hasten to the end of the bridge on the Westminster side, and there you will encounter me. I shall be dressed as you see me now; and then I will explain to you what farther is required to be done."

"But I would rather know now," said the Hangman, naturally suspicious of treachery.

"Well," said the Prince, after a brief pause, "I think it may be better to explain myself at once. When the Foundling has been a quarter of an hour in the recess of the bridge, you will have to fetch him away again and induce him to accompany you in a boat on some pretence or another, as far as the receiving-ship which lies off the Tower Stairs. You will place him aboard that ship, and there leave him. These are all the details of the service which I require of you, and for which the other five hundred guineas shall be placed in your hands when I meet you on the bridge to-night. And now, before you utter a word in reply to my proposals, let me tell you that if you *do* undertake this night's service, you must beware of treachery! For were you to receive my gold and then keep the boy with you still, in the hope of making him the pretence and means of future exactions, I will find a way to wreak a deadly vengeance upon you. Therefore let us understand each other well——"

"Your Royal Highness needn't fear: I will be staunch to the back-bone," exclaimed the Hangman. "Of course I don't mind as long as I know the lad is to be properly dealt with."

"He shall be amply and honourably provided for in the Colonies," rejoined the Prince. "It was at first my intention to have him taken from

you without your knowledge, and to keep you in ignorance of what ultimately became of him: but on maturer reflection, I resolved—seeing that he had lived with you so long—to deal frankly and candidly with you. I have now done so; and I offer you a large—a very large reward."

"And I shan't prove ungrateful for the kindness you have shown," said the Hangman.

"As a matter of course," observed the Prince, a thought striking him, "you will not mention to the young man a single word beforehand?—you will not in any way excite his suspicion relative to the proceedings that are this night to take place with regard to him?"

"Trust me," exclaimed Coffin. "I shall know how to invent some excuse to make him stay in the recess of the bridge till I go back to fetch him again; and as for getting him in a boat down as far as the receiving-ship, that will be easy enough—for I have often taken him on queer expeditions the object of which he has never known till the time came. All that can be easily managed: the deuce of it is what am I to say afterwards to my young woman and her brother about his disappearance?"

"Say that he has run away," cried the Prince; "or been killed in some scuffle."

"Well, I suppose I shall find an excuse," observed the Hangman. "Has your Royal Highness anything more to say?"

"Nothing," was the response: "only to warn you once again to beware of perfidy, and to bid you meet me punctually at the beginning of Westminster Bridge as the clock strikes eleven—the Foundling being at that hour in the recess agreed upon."

"All shall be right as the mail," responded the Hangman.

He and the Prince then separated—the latter hastening across the Mall to St. James's Palace, and the former quitting the park at an equally speedy pace.

Astonished at all he had heard—devoured with curiosity to learn who the Foundling's parents really could be—revolving in his mind a thousand schemes to penetrate this mystery and turn it to subsequent advantage—Daniel Coffin sped towards Fleet Lane; and in the absorbing pre-occupation of his thoughts he accomplished a considerable portion of the distance ere he remembered that he had enjoined Lady Ernestina to be sure and meet him that night at eleven o'clock. But then he reflected that the Prince must have no doubt already told her, or would let her know during the evening, that he had changed his mind and required not her services to convey the five hundred guineas. Then, under these circumstances, would Ernestina repair to the bridge at all? The Hangman could not possibly conjecture: nor did he now choose to devote much attention to the subject. His desires in that quarter were, for the time being, all wrapped up in the more absorbing excitement of the business he had in hand and the money he had yet to earn.

Meantime the Prince Regent had entered St. James's Palace, and proceeded straight to the apartments of his sister the Princess Sophia. On obtaining an interview with her alone, he hastened to explain as much as he thought fit of what he had done in the matter now nearest her heart.

"Everything is arranged," he said, "in accordance with your desires. This night, at eleven o'clock, shall you have an opportunity of gazing for a few moments upon your son, and even of speaking to him a few words if you will. But in this case you will of course address him as a stranger; and I warn you against suffering any transitory feeling of weakness to betray you into a revelation to that youth ——"

"No, no—not for the world," interrupted the Princess, "would I confess to him the secret of his birth! I shall not trust myself to speak to him at all: I shall merely look upon him —— But enough of this! What other arrangements have you made?"

"At half-past ten to-night I shall come to fetch you," resumed the Prince: "and you will have to accompany me on foot to the place where I have arranged for the youth to be at eleven. As a matter of course I have been compelled to make a confidant of that dreadful man—I will not name him—with whom the boy has been living so long. After you have seen your son, that man will take him away in a boat to the receiving-ship lying off the Tower, the lieutenant in command of which has already received private instructions how to act. A vessel now lying at Gravesend and bound for Canada, sets sail at three o'clock in the morning, by which hour there will be ample time to place the youth on board——"

"And when he arrives in Canada?" asked the Princess, impatiently.

"A good situation will be provided for him," replied the Prince, "and ample opportunity afforded for his reformation and future welfare."

"Thank you, brother, for all this trouble—this forethought—this excellent arrangement," cried the Princess, the tears trickling down her cheeks: then as a sudden thought flashed to her mind, she exclaimed, "But that dreadful man of whom you have made a confidant ——"

"I shall take good care of him also," answered the Prince, with a look of sinister meaning.

He then took a temporary leave of his royal sister, promising to return again at half-past ten o'clock: and in the meantime he went back to Carlton House to indulge in a luxurious banquet and a copious flow of wine. But in the middle of the festivity he received a whispered intimation from his faithful valet Germain, that Lady Ernestina Dysart had called to see him upon most urgent business. Apologising therefore to his guests at the dinner-table for leaving them for a few minutes, the Prince repaired to the apartment to which Lady Ernestina had been shown.

"Pardon me for thus intruding upon you, at such an hour," said her ladyship, raising the dark veil which had covered her features: "but you remember when I saw you the other day that you were to communicate with me again—and I was fearful you might have forgotten that *this* is the night ——"

"No—I had not forgotten it," interrupted the Prince, taking the lady's hand and pressing it warmly. "But the truth is, my dear Ernestina, I have made some other arrangements. Indeed, on maturer reflection, I could not think of allowing you to perform so ignominious a part as to meet that ruffian for the purpose of giving him the money ——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina: "then I presume you have entrusted some other messenger with the requisite amount? You are sure you have not neglected it?"

"Not for the world!" cried the Prince, anxious to get back to the dinner-table. "Everything is arranged: and you have nothing to fear."

"A thousand thanks for this assurance!" exclaimed Ernestina. "And now farewell: I will not keep you another moment away from your guests."

The Prince pressed his lips to Ernestina's, and they separated—his Royal Highness returning to the banquet which he had quitted so reluctantly, and his frail friend issuing forth again from Carlton House. But as with her veil closely drawn down, she retraced her steps to Albemarle Street, Ernestina said to herself, "It is all right! My mortal enemy will be *there*—and opportunity will consequently still serve the resolve I have taken. 'Tis for *me* to anticipate the messenger whom the Prince will send with the money! Yes—the path is clear enough. One bold deed—one energetic act—one tremendous crime—and I am safe! But, Ah! better even that crime than live in constant terror of this dreadful man! And after all, it can be no crime to rid oneself of a mortal enemy: it is merely striking a blow in self-defence!"

Such were Ernestina's dreadful musings, as she hurriedly retraced her way to Leveson House.

At half-past ten o'clock the Prince Regent, once more muffled up in his ample cloak and wearing the hat with the slouched brims, issued forth from Carlton House, entered St. James's Palace, and repaired to the apartments of the Princess Sophia. Almost immediately afterwards, he came forth again, accompanied by his sister, who was likewise enveloped in a capacious mantle besides wearing a thick veil attached to her bonnet. Clinging to her brother's arm, she sped nervously on by his side, her heart beating audibly and painfully. Little was spoken between them as they traversed the park in the most cautious manner with a view to avoid observation; but on this score they were comparatively safe—for the night was tempestuous, the wind had risen, the rain was falling, and few people were abroad. Even the occasional stragglers whom they met, when emerging into Great George Street, and afterwards in Bridge Street, little suspected that the gentleman and lady whom they thus passed and who were muffled up in those ample cloaks, were the Prince Regent and his royal sister!

When within about a dozen yards of the beginning of the bridge, the Prince said in a hurried voice, "You must now cross to the other side of the street—and keep your eyes fixed upon me. The lamplight is strong enough for that purpose. Watch until you see a man join me: then, if I keep him in conversation, you may rest assured that it is the ruffian Coffin. In this case lose no time in hastening on to the recess which I have already explained to you, and where no doubt the youth will be seated. Fortunate is it for our enterprise that the night is so inclement: there are evidently but very few persons abroad, and the bridge seems comparatively deserted."

While making this last observation, the Prince's straining eyes followed the curvature of the bridge as it was traced by the double row of lamps; and few indeed were the passenger-forms that darkened the spaces of light produced by those lamps which were suspended over the massive stone recesses that have only within the last few years been removed from the bridge. In compliance with her brother's suggestions, the Princess Sophia quitted his arm—crossed the street—and from the opposite side attentively watched his movements. Eleven o'clock was proclaimed by the iron tongue of time sounding from Westminster Abbey; and while the metallic din of the last stroke was yet vibrating in the gusty night-wind, a man enveloped in coarse rough garments stepped up to the Prince.

"I'm Daniel Coffin," he said.

"All right!" responded his Royal Highness. "Is the lad there?"

"He is—and deucedly puzzled, too, to know what it can be all about."

"No matter, as long as he is there. You will have the kindness to remain here with me for a few minutes."

"To be sure," rejoined the Hangman. "Devilish good dodge on your part to prevent me going to see what sort of a lady it is that means to peep into the recess! But I don't mean to play your Royal Highness such a dirty trick——"

"Hush! address me not by name!" whispered the Prince, impatiently: then as he cast a look across the way, he beheld his sister hurrying on towards the recess! "Here—come a little farther into the shade, and take this bag. You found the contents of the other to be all right?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," answered Daniel Coffin, as he clutched this second bag which the Prince placed in his hand.

We must now digress for a few moments to state that just before the Prince Regent and his royal sister made their appearance in Bridge Street, Lady Ernestina Dysart had passed rapidly that way and had at once entered upon the bridge. She was not now clad in her widow's weeds, but wore a garb evidently assumed for the purpose of disguise; and while one hand kept down the folds of a dark thick veil over her features, the other firmly clutched a naked dagger beneath her cloak. Could any human glance have penetrated through that veil, it would have seen her countenance ghastly pale, and her ashy white lips compressed with the stern resolve that swayed her soul and was reflected in the fixed look of her eloquent eyes. Her pace was rapid but determined: there was not the least irresolution in her mien, her gait, nor in her heart.

Continuing her way over the bridge, she flung a quick searching look into the middle recess on the left hand side as she passed it by; but no one was there. She accordingly proceeded onward until she reached the extremity of the bridge on the Lambeth side: and there, just as she was about to turn back, she caught a sudden glimpse of the unmistakable features of the Hangman as he looked up for a moment and the light of the lamp fell upon his countenance. Ernestina did not give a second glance: that one was sufficient—and as she thus acquired the sudden certainty that her mortal enemy was upon the bridge, a flame appeared to diffuse itself throughout her entire being. Instead of turning back at the instant, she walked a few yards farther on—saying to herself, "I will allow him time to reach the recess ere I retrace my way."

By not flinging a second glance upon the Hangman, but remaining satisfied with the one which had showed her he was there, she did not notice that some one accompanied him. With the fires of anticipated vengeance coursing through her veins, and clutching her dagger still more firmly than even at first, she turned back—retraced her steps—and just as she reached the middle recess, again caught sight of the Hangman who was standing on the footway as if waiting for some one. But a passenger was advancing behind Ernestina at the moment—and therefore she herself passed rapidly on. In a minute however she stopped and allowed the individual to pass her by. Another person was now also coming from behind; and without looking towards him, she also allowed him to pass. Then suddenly turning back, just as the Abbey clock began to strike eleven, she hastened to the recess.

At that moment a strong gust of wind swept over the bridge, making the flames flicker in the lamps in such a way that it seemed as if about to extinguish them. But by the uncertain glimmering Ernestina beheld the form of a man seated in the recess: and gliding in rapid as a ghost, she raised the dagger and drove it deep down into that individual's breast.

The attack was so sudden and as a matter of course so unexpected, that Jack the Foundling—for he indeed the victim was—no sooner caught a glimpse of the weapon flashing before his eyes in the lamp-light, than he was overpowered by the blow. A faint cry came from his lips as he fell back in the recess: but a louder and still more agonizing ejaculation burst from the tongue of the wretched Ernestina as the glimpse which she caught of the countenance suddenly upturned in mortal agony, showed her that it was *not* the Hangman whom she had thus stricken, but a youth whom she had never seen before!

Those cries—that of the young man and that of the assassin-lady—were drowned in the gust which was sweeping over the bridge: but suddenly seized with a frenzied horror, Ernestina fled precipitately, leaving the dagger sticking in the breast of the unfortunate youth. Alas! had she used a little more caution, this frightful misadventure would not have occurred: for she would perhaps have seen that the second individual whom she stopped to let pass, just before she flew back to the recess to deal the blow, was the very man for whom that blow was really intended!

We must now return to the Princess Sophia, whom we left watching at the commencement of the bridge. She saw through the gloom of night the dark form of a man accost her brother on the opposite side of the way: she lingered for a few moments to mark whether they remained together; and observing that they did so, she of course felt convinced that it was the Public Executioner! She therefore hastened along the bridge; and as she drew near the recess where she was to behold her son, such indescribable feelings seized upon her that she felt as if she had not courage to proceed, but must turn back abruptly! The next moment, however, she blamed herself for yielding to such sensations: and then, by a sudden revulsion of the heart's inscrutable emotions, she was seized with a fervid longing to gratify her curiosity and behold the offspring of her illicit love.

Inspired, therefore, with all the warmth of these maternal feelings—impelled by the parental yearnings that thus suddenly asserted their empire over her heart—the Princess Sophia sped onward and gained the recess. At that moment the wind was lulled—the lamp was burning steadily overhead—and its light was thrown full into the recess.

Heavens! what an appalling spectacle met the eyes of the Princess!—for *there*, within that nook of masonry—instead of her living son, whose animated countenance she expected to behold—a youth lay stretched upon the stone seat, his face ghastly and his eyes fixed like those of a corpse, and a dagger sticking deep in his breast!

A wild cry swept along the bridge—a cry which no gushing wind at that moment absorbed or drowned,—but a cry whose rending anguish thrilled to each extremity, rebounding from bank to bank, and reaching the ears of the Prince Regent and the Public Executioner.

END OF VOL. I OF THE SECOND SERIES.

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